

The Palgrave Macmillan Religious Language

Michael Scott



Religious Language

Also by Michael Scott

READING PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION (*co-edited with Graham Oppy*)

REALISM AND RELIGION: Philosophical and Theological Perspectives (*co-edited with Andrew Moore*)

Religious Language

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For my father

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	viii
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Part I Religious Language

1	Introduction	3
2	Apophatics	13
3	Berkeley	26
4	Braithwaite and Verificationism	40
5	Religious Internalism	54
6	Against Expressivism	71
7	Reference	86

Part II Religious Truth

8	Introduction	107
9	Reductionism	116
10	Minimalism	126
11	Truth in Religion	140

Part III Religious Discourse

12	Introduction	153
13	Metaphor and Analogy	160
14	Fictionalism	183

<i>Notes</i>	201
--------------	-----

<i>Bibliography</i>	206
---------------------	-----

<i>Index</i>	215
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Preface

The central aim of this book is to give an account of the meaning of religious sentences and utterances, as well as to explore some of the historical and philosophical background to the different theories that have been advanced on this topic. I take religious sentences (unless otherwise indicated, I discuss indicative religious sentences) to be ones that posit a religious entity, such as God, or a religious property, such as holiness. I take a religious utterance to be the production in speech or writing or otherwise of a token religious sentence; utterances are not tied to verbal communication. The scope of religious language and discourse could be construed more widely or narrowly. *The Song of Songs*, for example, could legitimately be regarded as part of religious discourse although it has little in the way of distinctively religious content. However, the proposed range of cases considered are widely taken to be – along with other areas of language and discourse such as ethics, science, aesthetics and mathematics – of distinct philosophical interest, with language that posits God being most central. It also captures the scope of religious language and discourse as it has traditionally been addressed in the philosophy of religion and theology.¹

A useful way into this subject is to begin with a *face value theory* of meaning and then address objections to it and alternative theories. The face value theory aims to give the most straightforward interpretation of religious language and discourse that is both sensitive to linguistic evidence and adheres as closely as possible to speakers' own understanding of what they are saying and communicating. Face value theory can be seen as the default philosophical position on religious language, divergence from which requires persuasive argument. There are three main issue areas on which a face value theory can be put forward. (a) What is the propositional content – or the 'semantic' or 'linguistic' content – of a religious sentence? What, in short, is such a sentence saying? (b) What are the truth conditions for religious sentences, and how should we understand the concept of truth as it is employed in religious language? (c) What are the meanings of religious utterances? That is, how are religious sentences used by speakers in religious discourse for the purposes of communication? Let's consider each of these in turn.

Take a simple religious sentence:

1. God is omnipotent.

Starting with (a), what does this sentence say? The face value theory has a very simple and seemingly pretty obvious answer: (1) says, or has the propositional content, *that God is omnipotent*. Elaborating a bit, the sentence represents the fact that God is omnipotent, and in affirming (1), we would expect a speaker (when speaking literally) to be expressing a belief in that fact. In general, the face value theory offers the same interpretation of religious language as for other descriptive areas of language. There is, according to face value theory, nothing special about the content of religious sentences other than their distinctive subject matter. Although disagreement with the face value theory of religious language is often presented as a 20th century phenomenon, as we see in Chapter 1, there is a history of opposition to this approach that stretches at least as far back as the early Christian apophatic theologians of the 4th century. There are various alternatives competing with face value theory. On the moderate end, it is argued that face value theory is incomplete because, in addition to expressing beliefs, religious sentences should also be understood as conventionally expressing ‘non-cognitive’ attitudes such as feelings, stances, intentions, emotions, plans and so on. On the more radical end, religious expressivists argue that religious sentences do not represent religious facts and should be interpreted as expressing non-cognitive attitudes rather than religious beliefs.

What are the truth conditions for religious sentences? Does the truth of religious sentences differ from the truth of other descriptive sentences? The face value approach has a straightforward answer to both questions. On the first, we can in most cases read off the truth conditions of an indicative religious sentence from what the sentence says. For example, (1) is true just in case God is omnipotent. On the second, there is no difference between the concept of truth in religious and other discourses. In general, according to the face value approach, the truth of religious sentences is determined in the same way as the truth of other descriptive sentences by showing that they correspond to the facts that they represent. One line of opposition to face value theory on the first question is taken by religious reductionists, according to whom the truth conditions of religious sentences are given by non-religious sentences; while religious language may appear to represent religious facts, it is really about natural or psychological or some other

class of facts. Face value theory is opposed on the second question by what I shall call religious *minimalism*, which is the view that there are significant differences between the concept of religious truth and the concept of truth employed in descriptive areas of language, such as science of history. The nature of religious truth and the truth conditions of religious sentences are the topics of Part II. We find that reductionism has received little support since the mid-20th century, but the assessment of it in Chapter 9 forms a historical backdrop to the discussion of minimalism that is taken up in the following two chapters. Minimalism about religion is the philosophically more sophisticated younger sibling of religious reductionism and has its origins in Wittgenstein's work on religion.

Suppose that the face value theory is correct about both the content and truth conditions of religious sentences. There remains a further question about what speakers mean when they utter religious sentences because this may diverge from the content of the sentence or from what makes the sentence true. Matters to do with the meanings of utterances that are not determined by their truth conditions and propositional content are sometimes said to belong to the 'pragmatics' of meaning in contrast to 'semantics'.² To take a famous example from Frege (1892), the expressions *and* and *but*, when the latter is used as a conjunction, appear to make the same contribution to the content of sentences of the form 'X and Y' and 'X but Y'; whatever makes for the truth of one also makes for the truth of the other.³ There is, however, a difference in their meaning. Consider, for instance, the difference between these two utterances:

2. She was married and she was happy.
3. She was married but she was happy.

(3) suggests or implies a contrast between being married and being happy, which the first does not (or does not to the same degree). Utterances can also imply the truth or falsity of a sentence distinct from what is said. For example, the utterance of (4) implies the truth of (5).

4. Some lawyers are overpaid.
5. Not all lawyers are overpaid.

However, if (5) is false, it does not thereby show that (4) is false, and a speaker could consistently assert (4) while believing that all lawyers are overpaid. Asserting (4) while believing that (5) is false might be

misleading, but it would not be a lie because the speaker did not actually say (5). H. P. Grice classified this kind of implied or suggested meaning as conversational implicature (1989, ch. 2). (5) is implicated by (4) but it is not part of its content. A possible application of conversational implicature is in interpreting metaphors (a topic which, along with analogy, is looked at in detail in Chapter 13). Suppose a speaker asserts:

6. God is my rock.

The content of this utterance appears to be just the patently false claim that God is my rock. However, the claim can be understood to imply various things that are not said; for example, that the speaker has found spiritual and emotional support in God.

According to face value theory, the utterance of (1) is usually an *assertion* that is intended literally and that in making this assertion the speaker expresses belief in the propositional that God is omnipotent. Against this, it has been argued that religious utterances – even apparently literal ones – are systematically and irreducibly metaphorical. According to fictionalists, speakers do not assert religious utterances, or we should not interpret speakers as expressing belief in what they are saying. The ‘pragmatic’ aspects of religious discourse is the topic of Part III.

These three general areas of interest – (a) religious language, (b) religious truth and (c) religious discourse – cover the main areas of disagreement about religious language and provide a general structure for the organisation of this book into three parts. At the beginning of each part, an introduction sets out in substantially more detail the face value theory and lines of opposition that have been very briefly outlined above; subsequent chapters in each part evaluate the different positions on these topics as well as set out a number of new lines of argument. Face value theory might be thought of as a ‘realist’ position. However, ‘religious realism’ is a philosophical term of art that has been used in so many different ways, often with no particular relevance to religious language, that I have avoided the expression as one that is as misleading as it is helpful.

The book also explores a number of issues about religious language and discourse, both philosophical and historical, on which face value considerations are inconclusive. For example, Chapter 7 assesses the nature of religious reference: is ‘God’ a name? How does ‘God’ refer to God? Chapter 5 looks at the question of how religious beliefs are linked to the motivations of religious believers. Chapter 4 takes up the question of why the verificationist theory of meaning, advanced in the 1920s

and 1930s, should have continued to exert such a large influence in the philosophy of religion late into the 20th century, long after it was discredited in mainstream philosophical discussion.

The focus of the book is mainly on *non-revisionary* theories of religious language and discourse. That is, we are interested in what religious sentences mean and what speakers mean when they use them. We will be less concerned with theories that propose revisions to religious language or changes in the attitudes that speakers have towards what they are saying. One of the trickiest problems in interpreting historical writers on this topic is to establish whether they intend a revisionary or non-revisionary theory. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that many of the main theories about religious language have revisionary and non-revisionary versions. While some reductionists argue that the truth conditions of religious sentences are given by, say, naturalistic sentences about worldly facts, others argue that the meaning of religious discourse and the reference of 'God' should be changed to give them a naturalistic foundation. While some fictionalists argue that religious utterances are, despite appearances to the contrary, not really literal assertions, other fictionalists argue that speakers make literal assertions but that this is a mistake and that current practice should be revised. It is theories of the former type – what speakers mean rather than what speakers should mean – with which we will be concerned. I return to the revisionary/non-revisionary distinction a number of times in the following chapters.

This book is a defence of much of what the face value theory has to say. However, face value theorists do not have it all their own way. Although I am entirely sympathetic with the face value account of religious truth, there are persuasive reasons to think that the face value account of religious language and discourse is incomplete. There is, I argue in Chapter 5, a good reason for thinking that the expression of non-cognitive states should play a role in the interpretation of religious language, albeit not one that should lead us to conclude that religious sentences do not report religious facts or that they are not used to (also) express religious beliefs. Nevertheless, the addition of a non-cognitive component to the conventional meaning of religious sentences is a significant modification of face value theory. We also find, in Chapter 14, that there are important differences between the speech acts employed in religious discourse when affirming indicative religious sentences and assertions of indicative sentences in other areas of discourse. However, while these differences are significant in understanding the meaning of religious discourse, they do not cast doubt on the fundamental face

value intuition that religious discourse trades in the expression of religious beliefs and the representation of religious facts.

Religious language is a fascinating topic, and in asking what speakers mean when they engage with religious language, we are addressing one of the fundamental questions in the philosophy of religion. In the course of this book we uncover some of the long and complicated history of work in the field, see connections between work on the topic in analytic philosophy, theology and Continental philosophy, and also forge links with a number of other philosophical fields, most notably the philosophy of language.

Notes

1. Alston raises the concern that discussing 'religious language' suggests that there is a discrete class of purely religious sentences (1989, p. 12; 2005, p. 220). No such implication should be taken here. A sentence that is religious can also fall into other categories. 'God is good', for instance, is both religious and ethical. Notably, all of the examples of religious language and discourse that Alston considers fall within the classification suggested here.
2. The use of these expressions, however, requires caution as there is no general agreement on their precise meaning. For further discussion, see Szabó (2005).
3. Dummett notes some exceptions, such as 'all but he' and 'bacon and eggs', where replacing one term with the other would result in a meaningless sentence (1981, p. 85). The point works, however, where X and Y are whole clauses.

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Part I

Religious Language

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1

Introduction

According to the face value interpretation of religious language, a religious sentence such as ‘God is omnipotent’ should be taken as saying – or as having the ‘semantic’ or ‘propositional’ content – *that God is omnipotent*, and in stating it a speaker conventionally expresses the belief that God is omnipotent. More generally, according to face value theory, the interpretation of religious language does not diverge from our interpretation of other descriptive areas of language. And that’s it. There’s nothing special about religious language other than its distinctive subject matter.

Despite the plausibility and simplicity of the face value theory, there is a long-standing and still enduring tradition of opposition, one that we explore over the next five chapters, ranging from those who argue that it is an incomplete story about the content of religious sentences to those who reject it entirely. The more radical opposition takes the form of denying that religious sentences represent religious facts or properties; this is often coupled with the theory that religious sentences are conventionally tied to the expression of non-cognitive states such as emotions, plans, stances, intentions, and so on. However, there are also more moderate lines of resistance to face value theory, such as the view that religious sentences do represent religious facts or properties and conventionally express religious beliefs *but also* express non-cognitive attitudes. On this latter view, face value theory is incomplete rather than substantially mistaken; it misses out the conative aspects of religious language. I will use *attitude theory* as a general term to refer to these theories.

In Chapters 5 and 6 we focus on contemporary views and arguments about attitude theory. In the following three chapters we look at some of the principal contributors to the historical development of

this tradition, although we will also get into the details of a number of topics of live philosophical debate, in particular the reference of 'God'. I have selected three contrasting lines of historical opposition to the face value theory of language. They are differently motivated, are taken from divers historical periods, and are applied to different regions of religious language. These are (a) the *apophatic* theologians – from whom I will draw in particular from Denys the Areopagite (late 5th and 6th centuries), Evagrius Ponticus (4th century) and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (later 14th century) – who present a distinctive way of thinking about language that represents God, motivated by the transcendence of God; (b) George Berkeley, whose attitude theory, mainly developed in his 1732 work *Alciphron*, is aimed at addressing concerns about the intelligibility of key Christian ideas such as grace, the Trinity, original sin and is restricted to Christian doctrinal language; and (c) Richard Braithwaite, who in the mid-1950s developed a wide-ranging attitude theory for religious language motivated by general considerations about the requirements for linguistic meaning. The background to Braithwaite's theory is the theory of meaning and critique of religion as 'factually contentless' developed by the logical positivists and popularised by A. J. Ayer (1936). Chapter 4 sets out this background and also takes up the question of why this critique remained such a central issue in the philosophy of religion into the late 20th century, despite the theory of meaning on which it was based being thoroughly discredited decades earlier.

If God is a transcendent being, as apophatic theologians supposed, then a problem arises as to how it is possible to refer to God. I look at this problem in Chapter 2 but defer a fuller discussion of theories of reference and their application in religious language to Chapter 7.

Varieties of attitude theory: surveying the field

For some readers the mention of 'non-cognitivist' attitudes may suggest a radical theory particularly associated with certain trends in mid to late 20th century Protestant theology and with such figures as Don Cupitt and Gordon Kaufman. However, we must be careful to distinguish between non-revisionary theories, which aim at giving an interpretation of religious language, from revisionary theories, which aim at modifying how religious language is used and at saying what it ought to mean rather than what it does mean. Face value theory and attitude theories are non-revisionary; they are put forward as accounts of the content and conventional use of religious sentences. But consider, for instance,

the Sea of Faith movement, inspired by Don Cupitt's work in the 1980s, which exemplifies this more radical theological position. It supports the pursuit of practices typically engaged in by religious believers – prayer, churchgoing, attempting to meet various moral standards, and so on – but without having religious belief.¹ Detractors judge this to be little more than atheism misleadingly presented as religious conviction (Plantinga, 2000). Proponents argue that one can legitimately gain access to the benefits of a religious life without being committed to superstitious beliefs (Cupitt, 1984). Some practising members of the Anglican Communion number among the movement's supporters. Now, those sympathetic to the Sea of Faith movement may appear to be rejecting the face value theory. But instead they are encouraging a revision to religious attitudes – to continue to engage in religious practice and discourse but without commitments to what they perceive as 'myths' and supernatural entities. As such, we should expect them to *endorse* face value theory because they think that (until the community of believers is won over) religious sentences describe religious facts and conventionally express the beliefs of speakers. Determining whether an author is putting forward a revisionary or non-revisionary theory can sometimes be difficult. But the distinction is a critical one: the merits of a revisionary theory will rest in part on the plausibility of the metaphysical considerations that motivate them (in this case, the motivation is that belief in supernatural beings is indefensible). The merits of a non-revisionary theory will be largely assessed by linguistic evidence about the meanings of religious sentences and their use.

Attitude theories come in a variety of forms and have been defended for several different areas of language, notably ethics (Blackburn, 1984; Gibbard, 1990), subjective judgements of degrees of certainty (Schneider, 2010), the self-ascription of mental states (Logue, 1995), aesthetics (Todd, 2004), the modal language of necessity and possibility (Thomasson, 2007) and truth (Strawson, 1950). What is the range of theoretical options available to the religious attitude theorist? There are three main positions. According to the most radical version, which I will call *non-cognitivism*, religious sentences do not report facts (religious or otherwise) and do not conventionally express beliefs (let alone religious beliefs); they instead express only non-cognitive states. However, while non-cognitivism constitutes a form of attitude theory, since it rejects the face value account of religious language in its entirety, it is on the extreme end of a range of theoretical options. There are two other options that are more modest and offer much more plausible ways of disagreeing with the face value theory. I will call these *moderate attitude*

theory and *expressivism*. Moderate attitude theorists agree with the face value theory that religious sentences represent religious facts; they also agree that affirming those sentences conventionally expresses religious beliefs. However, they argue that this is not the whole story about their content; religious sentences also conventionally express attitudes other than belief. To see how this might work, the following example from Simon Blackburn is useful:

If I say that someone is a Kraut, or blotto, I may express an attitude of contempt towards Germans, or of wry amusement at drunkenness, but I also say something true or false about their nationality or sobriety ... You should not use those terms unless you also sympathize with those attitudes. But in each case it would be wrong to infer that *no* description is given from the fact that an attitude is *also* expressed. (1984, p. 169)

Saying that someone is blotto is both representational and expressive; it expresses belief in the fact that is being represented (that the person is drunk) as well as an attitude other than belief (amusement about the person's condition). The moderate non-cognitivist is making a comparable point about religious language: it is similar to other areas of descriptive language insofar as its sentences represent facts and are used to express beliefs in those facts, but it is different insofar as it is also expressive of non-cognitive attitudes.

The face value theorist may reasonably wonder whether there is a genuine point of disagreement with moderate attitude theory. For it seems that we can use *any* descriptive and belief-expressing claim also to express a non-cognitive attitude. Suppose that you are being driven dangerously fast along a narrow road. You tensely tell the driver:

1. You are driving too quickly.

All that is said by (1), according to face value theory, is *that you are driving very quickly* and in uttering (1), you express belief in that content. However, in saying (1), you also communicate the non-cognitive attitude of alarm about the speed of the car. But we surely don't need an attitude theory for language about driving. More generally, it seems that we could in principle imagine circumstances for any given indicative sentence—descriptive or otherwise—in which it expresses a non-cognitive state. If this is all that the moderate attitude theorist is proposing, then the theory looks trivially true and fails to identify anything distinctive

about religious language; it does not tell us anything about religious language that it does not equally tell us about language about driving or any other area of language. However, this overlooks a critical component of attitude theory. The expression of non-cognitive attitudes is taken to be tied to the use of religious sentences as a matter of *linguistic convention*. While the utterance of (1) may express a feeling of alarm, this is because of the context in which it is uttered (a nervous passenger in a fast-moving car) and the manner in which it is said. This marks an important distinction between (1) and Blackburn's examples. A term like 'blotto' or pejorative expressions are tied to the expression of attitudes towards the people to which they are directed in all circumstances in which they are used. This, Blackburn suggests, seems to be part of the meaning of these words rather than something that the words are merely used, under certain circumstances, to imply or communicate. In contrast, (1) does not express alarm in all circumstance in which it is used – for example, when calmly uttered by a driving instructor to a learner going marginally over the speed limit. For the moderate attitude theorist, the expression of non-cognitive attitudes is not an incidental, context-dependent feature of the use of religious sentences but is built into their meaning along with their representational content. Moderate attitude theory finds some defenders in ethics (Copp, 2001) but has hitherto not been defended in the philosophy of religion.

According to the expressivist version of attitude theory, religious sentences conventionally express non-cognitive attitudes and in many cases also express beliefs. However, religious sentences do not have *religious* content, and the beliefs that they express are not religious beliefs. To see how this might work, consider a toy version of expressivism for funniness. Comedic expressivism is the theory that sentences about what is funny – that is, sentences in which the predicate 'funny' or related predicates of comicality are used – do not represent facts about what is funny but instead conventionally express amusement towards the object to which the predicate is directed. Take the sentence

2. Rowan Atkinson's performance at the London Olympics opening ceremony was funny.

The comedic expressivist argues that this sentence has an expressive meaning, which we can give as

3. HA! (Rowan Atkinson performing at the London Olympic opening ceremony).

Where 'HA!' stands for an attitude of amusement towards the bracketed content. What is particularly notable is that the predicate 'funny' disappears in the expressivist interpretation of (2) so that the sentence does not attribute a genuine property to Rowan Atkinson's performance. Now, the comedic expressivist believes that sentences about what is funny are conventionally tied to the expression of attitudes and are not used to express beliefs about what is funny. Talk of funniness, for the expressivist, does not pick out a genuine property of objects and speakers. However, expressivism is not thereby reduced to non-cognitivism because (2) also expresses this true proposition:

4. Rowan Atkinson performed at the London Olympics opening ceremony.

And someone who sincerely says (2) believes and says (4). So expressivism allows for sentences about what is funny to have representational content that the speaker also believes, provided that what is said does not express a proposition about what is funny. However, there are also cases like

5. That was funny.

The expressivist interprets (5) as expressing only a non-cognitive attitude:

6. HA! (that thing).

So no complete proposition is expressed by (5) on the expressivist interpretation of its meaning. According to the comedic expressivist, saying (5) does not conventionally express a belief, only an attitude of amusement.

Returning to the position of religious expressivist, we can see from the example of expressivism about funniness that there will be a similar division between religious sentences that also report non-religious facts and those that do not. Religious expressivists grant that the former may express beliefs in (non-religious) propositions and also express non-cognitive attitudes, while the latter are interpreted as purely expressive. Expressivists do thereby concede that religious language may describe non-religious facts and be used to express non-religious beliefs; however, this is consistent with their position that religious sentences do not represent religious facts and are not used to express beliefs in religious facts. Moreover, this concession looks unavoidable. There does not seem

to be any plausible interpretation of (7), for example, that denies that it represents the facts described in (8) and (9).

7. Ten plagues were inflicted on Egypt by God to persuade Pharaoh to release the Israelites from slavery.
8. Egypt underwent ten plagues.
9. Pharaoh held the Israelites in slavery.

Examples such as these make it difficult to see how non-cognitivism, which denies that religious sentences conventionally express any beliefs, is a remotely tenable position.

We can see the main options as follows:

Face value theory. Religious sentences represent religious facts and are conventionally used to express beliefs that those facts obtain.

Non-cognitivism. Religious sentences do not represent facts and are not conventionally used to express beliefs; they express non-cognitive attitudes.

Expressivism. Religious sentences do not represent religious facts but do conventionally express non-cognitive attitudes; insofar as they represent non-religious facts (if they represent any facts at all), they may be used conventionally to express belief in those (non-religious) facts.

Moderate attitude theory. Religious sentences represent religious facts and are conventionally used to express belief in those facts *and* they conventionally express non-cognitive states.

Because of the problem with non-cognitivism raised above, expressivist and moderate versions of attitude theory are those I will evaluate as rivals to face value theory.

Contemporary treatments of religious language have not always done attitude theories justice. Among the misconceptions about attitude theories are the following: attitude theories are a modern phenomenon and in particular an upshot of the verificationist theories of meaning developed by the logical positivists in the 1920 and 1930s; they are supported by purely philosophical and non-religious (even anti-religious) arguments; the motivations for attitude theories are alien to religious traditions and do not naturally emerge from any religious considerations; opposition to face value theory takes the form of arguing that religious sentences do not represent facts (or lack propositional content) and are not used to express religious beliefs.

Here are some representative comments. J. L Mackie says:

The main reason why it has been thought that religious language cannot be literally meaningful is that some philosophers – particularly the logical positivists – have embraced a strongly verificationist theory of meaning... But this theory of meaning is itself highly implausible. (1982, p. 2)

Richard Swinburne also notes the recent and non-religious motivations for opposition to face value theory:

Some twentieth-century writers from R. B. Braithwaite to Wittgenstein and D. Z. Phillips have denied that theological ‘assertions’ ever make statements, claims about how things are. As an account of the actual use of such assertions by religious believers of the past two millennia, this is plainly false. The sentences of creeds do make statements. (1993, p. 88)

Similar historical assessments are offered by Alston (2005), Wynn (1995) and others. Peter van Inwagen contends that disagreement with face value theory is really an atheistic position masquerading as a religious one:

Not so long ago, as time is measured in the history of thought, anyone who said that it was a mistake to regard *x* as *F* would have meant, and have been taken by everyone to mean, that *x* was *not F*... Not so long ago, everyone who said that nothing had the properties on the list ‘aseity, holiness, omnipotence, omniscience, providence, love, self-revelation’ would have proudly described himself as an atheist. (2006, p. 156)

A similar point is made by Plantinga (2000). Before 1900, van Inwagen adds, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim philosophers and theologians would have agreed that at least some or all of these properties were essential properties of God.

As we see in the following three chapters, the historical assumptions in these claims are misplaced. There is a tradition of opposition to face value theory stretching back centuries. Moreover, prior to the 20th century it is found within religious traditions and defended by leading theologians. The assumptions about the motivations for attitude theories are also misplaced. Some attitude theories are advanced for purely philosophical reasons. However, both the apophatic theologians

and George Berkeley intended to develop positions that were consonant with Christian theology. Berkeley took his attitude theory to provide an effective *response* to scepticism about the intelligibility of religious doctrine, as well as to explain the motivational, life-changing nature of Christian faith. The apophatic theologians suggest a form of attitude theory as a way of understanding how engagement with religious language can lead humans to a close relationship with God. It is true that Braithwaite was influenced by A. J. Ayer, who certainly had no sympathy for religious belief. However, Braithwaite's own aim was to take what he saw as successful in the logical positivists' arguments and show how religious language could satisfy the seemingly tough verificationist standards of meaning that they proposed and thereby present no obstacle to its use. Finally, none of the attitude theorists that we consider adopt a theory as radical and implausible as non-cognitivism.

Recent treatments of religious language have therefore not been sensitive to the range of theoretical options available to attitude theorists nor to its historical roots. Notably, the most promising form of attitude theory, the moderate version, has been overlooked. As we find in Chapters 5 and 6, there is much to be said for a theory that gives a role to the conventional expression of non-cognitive attitudes in the interpretation of religious sentences while remaining consistent with the face value intuitions that religious sentences represent religious facts and express beliefs.

Some preliminaries

Before exploring the historical background to attitude theory, we should note a couple of general requirements that any satisfactory attitude theoretic account has to meet, since we will turn to them again in the subsequent evaluation of different attitude theories.

First, a *positive account* of the non-cognitive attitudes expressed by using religious sentences is needed. Attitude theorists need to set out an analysis, comparable to the one given for comedic expressivism, that specifies the religious attitudes that are being expressed. Notably, finding a positive account looks like a more difficult challenge for the religious attitude theorist than the equivalent task for the ethical expressivist. According to a standard version of ethical expressivism, ethical language is characterised by the ascription of 'good' or 'bad' or related morally evaluative predicates to actions or events. Since ethical sentences thereby have a positive or negative evaluation built into them, expressivists have a ready-made positive account about the

attitudes expressed: ethical sentences conventionally express approval or disapproval of the action or event to which the ethical predicate in question is assigned (Blackburn, 1984). The corresponding analysis is also straightforward. Sentence (10) can be interpreted by (11):

10. It is wrong to lie.

11. B! (lying)

Where 'B!' expresses disapproval (or boo-hoo!) towards lying. In contrast, religious predicates do not neatly divide into classes that can be linked to the expression of approval and disapproval. Many religious sentences do not involve any clearly normative predicate; some do not appear to use religious predicates at all, such as

12. God created the world.

Religious attitude theorists therefore need to find a distinct positive account of the non-cognitive attitudes expressed by the use of religious language.

One advantage of the face value theory is its ability to explain the apparent complex and disciplined syntactic and semantic features of religious language. For example, religious sentences can be negated, embedded in conditionals, regimented into logical arguments, and so on. On the face value theory we can explain why, for example, (12) and the negation of (12) cannot both be true: they represent inconsistent facts. And we can similarly explain why one shouldn't believe both (12) and the negation of (12): they are beliefs with inconsistent content and cannot both be true. In contrast, non-cognitive states do not seem to be inconsistent. For example, I may have contrary desires – such as the desire to eat lots of food and the desire to remain slim – and while it may be difficult to satisfy both these desires, it is not inconsistent to have them. But if expressivism is correct, then why shouldn't someone agree with both (12) and not-(12)? Doing so would not result in any failing in logic. Attitude theorists (expressivists in particular) need to explain why religious language appears to exhibit logical discipline.

These two issues – a positive account and the logic of religious language – are challenges that a satisfactory form of attitude theory will need to be able to meet.

2

Apophatics

A tradition in Christian thought, most prominent in early Christianity to the late medieval period, emphasises the conceptual and epistemic inaccessibility of God. Sometimes called ‘mystical’ or ‘apophatic’ theology, in contrast with the dominant ‘cataphatic’ approach, this tradition – or at least one influential strand of it – motivates an account of religious language that diverges from the face value theory. Apophatic theology, or ‘apophatics’, is infrequently considered in analytic philosophy of religion and then usually by way of ‘negative theology’, or the ‘*via negativa*’, a method employed by some apophatic theologians to reach a closer relationship with God by rejecting attempts to assign properties to God. Apophatic theology has received considerably more attention within continental philosophy of religion, notably from Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion. However, for reasons we come to shortly, they arrive at an apophatic interpretation of religious discourse rather than religious language. Closer scrutiny of their reading of apophatic theology is therefore taken up in Part II.

Recent historical and theological research on apophatic theology usually groups together theologians who take divine transcendence to imply an epistemological limitation on humans, such that God’s nature is in principle unknowable to us, with theologians who regard God’s nature as inconceivable (Turner, 1995). For philosophical purposes, in particular for our current focus on religious language, it is important to distinguish these two accounts of transcendence. The idea that God is epistemically transcendent has a long pedigree, with Augustine among its principal proponents, but is consistent with the face value theory that religious language (and discourse) can represent facts about God. If God is epistemically transcendent, we are incapable of knowing whether any given sentence about God’s nature is true, but our ability

to express facts about God and to believe those facts is not thereby blocked. In contrast, conceptual transcendence, the principal and most influential proponent of which is Denys (1987), presents an immediate problem for the face value theory. If we cannot conceive of God's nature, then it would seem that we cannot formulate any sentence nor have any belief that accurately represents God's nature. Any sentence that represents God as being some way or other assigns some property to God; in either communicating or grasping what the sentence says, one thereby conceives of God as having that property. So it follows from God's conceptual transcendence that no sentence about God will say something true about God's nature. If language that is apparently about God fails accurately to describe its subject matter, it needs some purpose other than representing God for there to be value in using it. This raises the problem of why we should use religious language at all if it yields only untruths. I call this the *elimination problem*.

The epistemic form of apophatic theology is sometimes taken to have similarly radical implications for religious language as conceptual apophaticism. For example, in Denys Turner's insightful theological analysis of apophatic theology (which he takes to include both Augustine and Denys) he writes:

It follows from the *unknowability* of God that there is very little that can be *said* about God: or rather, since most theistic religions have a great number of things to say about God, what follows from the unknowability of God is that we can have very little idea of what all these things said about God *mean*. And, strictly speaking, that is what 'apophaticism' asserts, as one can tell from its Greek etymology: *apophasis* is a Greek neologism for the breakdown of *speech*, which, in face of the unknowability of God, falls infinitely short of the mark. (1995, p. 20)

But why does it follow from the unknowability of God that we 'have little idea' of the meaning of what we say about God? This argument relies on an unarticulated assumption that what we can meaningfully say about something is limited to what we can know about it. Later in Part I we look at an influential but almost universally rejected attempt to forge a link between meaningfulness and knowledge put forward by the logical positivists. Without such an assumption, Turner's argument looks invalid. There shouldn't be any more difficulty with meaningfully talking about an unknowable God than there is in talking about unprovable mathematical conjectures or about events in the unknowably

distant past, such as the precise cloud pattern over the Atlantic exactly one thousand years ago. Henceforth, by apophatic theology I refer only to the theory that we cannot conceive of God's nature. The three selected apophatic theologians, Denys, Evagrius, and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (CU), all fit this description.

There are three themes that emerge in the writings of these three apophatic theologians that appear particularly relevant for developing an account of religious language. First, they take the most important objective of human engagement with religion to be to secure a relationship with God. According to the author of CU, we can with the assistance of grace achieve 'what you cannot achieve by nature, that is, to be united to God in spirit, in love, and in harmony of will' (2001, p. 67). Evagrius describes it as an 'ascent to God' (2006, p. 190), as does Denys: the purpose of religious engagement is a striving 'upwards as much as you can toward union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge' (1987, p. 135). Commenting on Moses, who Denys takes to have achieved this objective, Denys writes:

But then he [Moses] breaks free of them, away from what sees and is seen, and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing. Here, renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible, he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united by a completely unknowing inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing. (1987, p. 135)

Second, as indicated by this last quotation, the relationship with God that we are striving towards is taken not to involve having true beliefs about God's nature or more generally any conceptualisation of what God is. Indeed, a closer relationship with God requires one to *dispense* with ideas and beliefs about God. For the author of CU, the relationship is not cognitive at all:

All rational beings, angels and men, have in them, each individually, two principal active faculties, one a faculty of knowledge, and the second a faculty of love; and God, their maker, is forever beyond the reach of the first of these, the intellectual faculty; but by means of the second, the loving faculty, he can be fully grasped by each individual being. (2001, p. 23)

He later adds: 'of God himself no one can think...he can well be loved, but he cannot be thought' (2001, pp. 27–8). This is achieved by disciplined contemplation of God that requires one to set aside attempts to conceptualise God. The following comments are illustrative:

Proud, ingenious intellect must always be overcome and firmly trodden underfoot if the work of contemplation is to be truly undertaken in purity of spirit. (2001, p. 25)

Understanding, which keeps on thrusting itself on you when you apply yourself to this blind work of contemplation, must always be forced down (2001, p. 32)

See that nothing is at work in your mind or your will but God alone, and try to overthrow all knowledge and feeling of anything below God, and trample it down beneath the cloud of forgetting. (2001, p. 66)

Evagrius too sees unity with God to require the 'setting aside of representations' (2001, p. 193).

Third, the authors characterise what is said in the ascent to God as a form of 'praise' or of 'prayer'. According to Evagrius, 'If you are a theologian, you will pray truly, and if you pray truly, you will be a theologian' (2006, p. 192). The author of CU also talks of 'praise' (2001, p. 27) and of prayer that can take the form of a single word – akin to the exclamations 'Fire!' or 'Out!' – that expresses love of God. However, by far the best-known part of apophatic theology concerns Denys's recommendations for how to guide our praise of God to achieve a union with God. This is the strategy of negative theology that he proposes as a mental discipline to deter the believer's attempts to understand God. Despite its name, the method does not recommend the simple negation of sentences about God. There would be little advantage in such a strategy because saying, for example, 'God is not omnipotent' is no less a representation of God than 'God is omnipotent', even though it is much less informative. Instead, negative theology is an ongoing process of taking sentences that assign properties to God and sentences that assign *incompatible* properties to God and denying all of them and combining these denials. For example, 'It is not number or order, greatness or smallness, equality or inequality, similarity or dissimilarity. It is not immovable, moving, or at rest.... It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being' (1987, p. 141). The aim of this method is, not to find a negative

claim about God that one can endorse, but to lead to an end to one's conceptualisation of God.

[M]y argument now rises from what is below up to the transcendent, and the more it climbs, the more language falters, and when it has passed up and beyond the ascent, it will turn silent completely, since it will finally be at one with him who is indescribable. (1987, p. 139)

These comments do not, of course, give us an explicit account of religious language, let alone one that is worked out in any detail. However, they do give us some of the materials for developing such an account, and as we have seen, some response is needed to the elimination argument for the cogency of apophatic theology. Apophatic theologians clearly regard language about God as representing God, because they explicitly recommend ways in which to free ourselves from those representations by various forms of mental discipline, most notably the negative method. They are therefore not expressivists or non-cognitivists, as these positions are defined in Chapter 1. If non-cognitivism or expressivism were true, no such recommendations would be necessary, because our language would already (despite appearances) not be describing God. Also, as we have seen, apophatic theologians frequently refer to God and clearly do not believe that talk of God should be eliminated; on the contrary, they believe that by thinking and talking about God, one can attain a union with God even if someone who has attained that state of union might *not* have any beliefs about God's nature. So the apophatic theologians need an account of religious language that holds these ideas together: (a) religious language is representational; (b) God is conceptually transcendent; (c) religious language is useful. This, of course, leads back to the elimination argument. A face value theory of religious language leaves (a) and (b) in tension with (c), because (a) and (b) imply that representations of God are false, thereby giving a *prima facie* reason for dispensing with religious language about God. So what is the reason for talking and thinking about God if what we say and think cannot truly represent God?

There are, I think, two main responses to the elimination argument. The first, which I will call the *linguistic option*, is to defend a form of attitude theory. Since apophatic theologians rule out expressivism and non-cognitivism, let's consider moderate attitude theory. This theory would be restricted to sentences about God's nature and would interpret

them as having both a descriptive and non-cognitive content according to the following schema,

- 1. God is *x*.
- 1a. God is *x*.
- 1b. A (God).

where (1) gives a sentence about God which has the representational content (1a) but is also conventionally tied to the expression of a non-cognitive attitude (1b) directed towards God. If religious sentences are conventionally tied to the expression of both beliefs and non-cognitive attitudes, then our inability to conceive of God does not undermine the use of those sentences provided that the non-cognitive attitude component (1b) is of sufficient merit to outweigh the falsity of (1a). Since apophatic theologians take the central objective of religion to be the achievement of a non-cognitive relationship with God, this is surely something they would want to endorse. This leaves open the question of what attitudes are referred to by 'A'. However, one answer suggested by apophatic theologians is that what is said about God has the form of praise. As such, religious sentences might be understood as conventionally expressing attitudes to God such as devotion, respect, and (following the author of CU) love.

The second response to the elimination problem, which I will call the *speech act option*, accepts the face value theory that religious sentences about God's nature are purely representational but contends that they are *used* for the purpose of praising God (and thereby express non-cognitive attitudes) rather than merely describing God's nature. Apophatic theology, on this option, is distinctive for the account it offers of the use to which we put religious language rather than for the theory it offers of religious language. This second option is taken up by Jean-Luc Marion (1995) and Jacques Derrida (1992); they also explore the idea that religious discourse is praise of God. Denys Turner is also sympathetic to the speech act option, though with some important differences that we come to presently. Turner interprets Denys's theology as relevant to religious utterances rather than religious language: while sentences about God are representational, they are used metaphorically.

To be clearer about the difference between the linguistic and speech act options, it is useful to introduce a distinction from J. L. Austin between locutionary and illocutionary acts. A locutionary act, according to Austin (1975, p. 95), is simply the act of saying something. That is, it is the act of uttering a token sentence (a string of words with a grammatical

structure). Illocutionary acts, or *speech acts*, are what a speaker does in saying something and include assertions, questions, commands, warnings, threats, statements of intention, requests, and so on. Suppose, for example, that you are a passenger in a car and tell the driver:

2. There is a police check at the next turning.

Saying (2) would be a locutionary act, and in uttering the sentence, you would perform the illocutionary act of warning the driver.

What in general is the relationship between the type of speech act and the type of sentence that it employs? At the very least, the grammatical mood of a sentence is one of the standard ways in which a type of speech act is indicated. Using a sentence with an interrogative mood, for example, is a clear linguistic indicator that one is asking a question. Moreover, at least some illocutionary acts appear – and have seemed to many philosophers – to be associated with corresponding sentence types as a matter of linguistic convention. For instance, declaratives are usually used in assertions, interrogatives in questions, and imperatives in requests and commands.¹ However, while this relationship may be conventional, it does not hold in all cases. For example, if I say to someone sitting next to me at dinner,

3. Can you pass the salt?

I am making a request by using an interrogative sentence. Suppose a student at a graduation ceremony is told,

4. After you have bowed to the Vice-Chancellor, you will exit the door to the right.

The student is being issued an instruction, although the sentence expressed by (4) is in the indicative mood. These examples show that if there is a conventional relationship between speech act type and the mode of the sentence expressed, the convention does not exclusively determine the speech act type. Other facts may come into play, such as the context of the utterance and the intentions of the speaker.

Taking these points, we can understand the speech action option as a theory about the illocutionary acts, or speech acts, performed in religious discourse. That is, while indicative religious utterances are conventionally used to make assertions and express beliefs, they are not used in religious discourse to make assertions but instead perform the

distinct illocutionary act of praise. Akin to (3) and (4), speakers employ a sentence type characteristic of one type of speech act to perform a different type of speech act. In this case, indicative sentences about God with representational content are used to express non-cognitive attitudes towards God. The linguistic option, in contrast, is a theory about the linguistic conventions of religious sentences. Indicative religious sentences, according to this option, are conventionally used to express beliefs but also (like Blackburn's example of 'blotto' in Chapter 1) are used to express attitudes.

Although both options merit further discussion, in this chapter we are concerned with the linguistic option. For reasons outlined earlier, questions about the correct interpretation of religious discourse (as opposed to the language it employs) are left to Part III. So an assessment of the theory suggested by Marion, as this concerns the use of religious language, is accordingly deferred. We also consider in Part III theories of religious metaphor and whether religious discourse is irreducibly metaphorical. However, as an analysis and development of Denys's theology, Turner's suggestion of metaphor does not seem a particularly well suited choice of speech act for the interpretation of talk about God. Metaphors seem to be utterances that the speaker usually takes to be trivially false ('Juliet is the sun') or trivially true ('No man is an island') with the intention of implying something that is literally true. But for Denys, as well as the other apophatic theologians we have considered, there are *no* literal truths about God's nature. If talk of God's nature is metaphorical but there is nothing true about God's nature that we can imply in using metaphor, this seems to defeat the reason to use a metaphor in the first place.

Clearly one difficulty with apophatic theology, if it is to developed into a viable form of moderate attitude theory, is that it has a sketchy response to the 'positive account' objection raised in Chapter 1. In particular, a worry about the suggestion that in praising God one expresses attitudes of love and devotion is whether these attitudes themselves require the speaker to have beliefs about the object of one's love or devotion. Suppose, for example, that one must have beliefs about God's nature in order to love God; one must believe, say, that God is the kind of being that merits one's love. If this belief is false, as would seem to follow from apophatic theology, then one's love will not be directed towards God but towards the object of one's belief (which is to say, no real object at all). So the apophatic approach to religious language, read as a variety of moderate attitude theory, will need to defend an account of the non-cognitive elements of religious language that does not presuppose that

we can form true beliefs about God's nature. However, since we look at length in later chapters at different positive accounts put forward by attitude theorists, let us focus in this chapter on a particularly interesting and distinctive objection raised against the apophatic position: that it is self-defeating.

If apophatic theology contends that God is conceptually transcendent, it would seem to follow that the contention 'God is transcendent' must be false. The objection is clearly developed by Alvin Plantinga. He defines the problematic position as 'If there were an infinite, transcendent, and ultimate being, our concepts could not apply to it' (2000, p. 6) and presents the argument as follows:

One who makes the claim seems to set up a certain subject for predication – God – and then declares that our concepts do not apply to this being. But if this is so, then, presumably, at least one of our concepts – *being such that our concepts don't apply to it* – *does* apply to this being.... The idea, one takes it, is that we *do* at least have *some* grasp of the properties of being infinite, transcendent, and ultimate (else we shouldn't be able to understand the sentence or grasp the proposition it expresses). (2000, p. 6)

If God cannot be conceived of to the extent that is required to express apophatic theology, then the position looks self-defeating and therefore false. If we can conceive of God to that extent, then the theory is inconsistent and therefore false.

Plantinga's objection is decisive against the theory he formulates. But is this an accurate presentation of the apophatic position on conceptual transcendence (and, we should note, Plantinga's argument is not aimed specifically at capturing apophatic theology)? There are, I think, two plausible ways in which apophatic theology might escape Plantinga's argument.

First, none of the apophatic theologians thought that *no* concept could apply to God; they frequently talk about God's action in the world, the relationship between God and humans, and how we should act towards and think about God. Rather, they are sceptical about our ability to conceive of God's nature. Let's call properties of God's nature *intrinsic properties*. Intrinsicness is intended to mark a distinction between properties that standardly include omnipotence, omniscience, benevolence, and so on, from properties such as God's action in the world and relationship with humans. Now, if conceptual transcendence is an intrinsic property of God, Plantinga's objection could be reformulated

against the theory 'We cannot conceive of God's nature' and would be equally effective: apophatic theologians would be attributing intrinsic properties to God and then claiming that we cannot conceive of them. But why should transcendence be an intrinsic property? Our view on whether transcendence, if it is a property of God, is intrinsic or non-intrinsic will of course depend on what we take as the grounds for classifying divine properties as properties of God's nature. I don't propose to settle that debate here. However, the apophatic theologian could point to three intuitively relevant differences between transcendence and intrinsic properties of God.² First, an object's intrinsic properties might be thought of as ones that the object has by itself without depending on any other thing. But transcendence is not something that God has by virtue of God alone; it is a property that also depends on human conceptual capacities. Second, the intrinsic properties of an object might be thought to be non-relational.³ But transcendence is a relational property concerning human conceptual abilities (and the conceptual abilities of other created beings) with respect to God's nature. Understood in this way, transcendence is a property akin to unknowability: it is not part of God's nature but a relational property defining what we are in principle capable of finding out about God's intrinsic properties. Third, intrinsic properties might be thought of as those which could not change without a change in the object's identity. But it seems that divine transcendence could change without a change in God's identity. For example, if through some extraordinary expansion of human conceptual capacities we were able to have even a partial grasp of God's essential properties, God would no longer be transcendent; it does not seem, however, that there would thereby be a change in God. These points show that it can plausibly be maintained that transcendence is not an intrinsic property of God; apophatic theologians can therefore successfully fend off Plantinga's argument that the theory is self-defeating.

There is a second response to Plantinga's argument available to apophatic theologians, one which is perhaps more in sympathy with their theological approach. They could argue that God is not – as Plantinga supposes – set up as a transcendent object of predication of which we cannot conceive, but that in forming ideas of God our attempts invariably fail. A useful comparison here is with Descartes's method for determining what we know for certain. He does not begin with a theory of knowledge but instead aims to identify which of his beliefs are known by progressively disposing of beliefs that are subject to doubt. He considers classes of beliefs – beliefs about the external world, mathematical beliefs, and so on – and whether they could be in error;

possibly mistaken beliefs are set aside. He is finally left with certainty just in the *cogito*, from which he attempts to reconstruct his belief system on a foundation of certain knowledge. In a similar way, apophatic theologians can be understood as dispensing with inadequate representations of God. The negative method can be seen as aiming to do exactly this:

What has actually to be said about the Cause of everything is this. Since it is the Cause of all beings, we should post and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regard to beings, and, more appropriately, we should negate all these affirmations, since it surpasses all beings. Now we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion. (1987, p. 136)

Whereas Descartes took his method eventually to yield beliefs of which he could be certain, the apophatic method does not arrive at a positive conception of God's nature; we consider each representation and reject it as mistaken. Notwithstanding, the comparison is still useful. Apophatic theologians can be seen as searching for and progressively rejecting each concept of God's nature as inadequate rather than insisting on a metaphysical theory that God is transcendent. Of course, anyone who thinks that at least some of our beliefs about God do truly represent God's nature will disagree with the results of this method; however, the application of this method is not self-defeating.

Although conceptual apophaticism may have the resources to answer Plantinga's objection, there is a related problem that appears potentially more difficult to solve. Apophatic theologians doubt our abilities to conceive of God but also clearly believe that we are capable of *referring* to God. They take it to be possible for humans to form relationships with God, to pray to and praise God. They say things *about* God and talk *of* God even though we may not be capable of formulating any accurate beliefs about God's intrinsic properties. Apophatics therefore seem committed to the following two claims:

5. There is no true representation of God's nature.
6. We can and do refer to God.

The problem generated by these two claims can be seen when we consider the meaning of the expression 'God' and how it designates God. One theory is that 'God' is a name that expresses a descriptive content by

which God is uniquely identified and thereby can be referred to. But if this is right and granting that apophatics are committed to (5) and (6), we can see that their position will be in difficulty. If we *can* successfully refer to God as required by (6), then in using 'God' we will need to have a stock of descriptions of God that are expressed by saying 'God' and by which God is designated. The descriptions will need to pick out God if 'God' is to refer successfully. This puts pressure on (5). On the other hand, if we *cannot* truly represent God's nature as required by (5), then 'God' will lack the descriptive content by which the name could be used to refer to God. From which it follows that (6) is false.

Developing this argument a bit further, let's suppose that

7. 'God' is a proper name.

Also, assume a descriptivist theory of proper names:

8. Proper names express properties that determine their reference.

If both (7) and (8) are correct, then (5) and (6) will be difficult to maintain. The problem is not that apophatic theology is self-defeating, because the descriptive content of 'God' could be made up of descriptions that do not represent God's nature. Perhaps God could be described by facts about God's actions in the world or relationship with human beings. However, for a very large number of speakers talking about God, the descriptive content associated with the name will be up (at least partly) by representations of God's nature: that God is an omnipotent being, benevolent, and so on. It seems that apophatic theologians will have to say that many speakers do not, in what they say about God, successfully refer to God.

Apophatic theologians give no sign of wanting to adopt such a radical position.⁴ Their work is usually presented as advice on how to reach union with God by reforming one's thoughts and attitudes rather than the more drastic and revisionary proposal that speakers in many cases fail to say anything about God. The religious beliefs and utterances of those uneducated in apophatic theology is not presented as being either harmful or misguided. The proposed interpretation of the apophatic account as a moderate attitude theory makes sense of this approach by addressing the elimination problem. Religious sentences about God conventionally express both beliefs about God and attitudes towards God. Religious discourse has merit because even though the beliefs about God may be in error, the valuable expressive component remains, and

this can also be honed into a closer relationship with God. We can praise God and improve our relationship with God even if we cannot conceive of God's intrinsic properties. However, it follows from the objection about reference that speakers are subject to a much more serious failing than having false beliefs about God: they generally fail even to refer to God and thereby fail to have any beliefs about God either truly or falsely. Since the non-cognitive attitudes expressed in using religious sentences are presumably directed towards the being identified in using the sentence, these attitudes will also fail to be about God.

It seems that the apophatic position, if it is to be successful, must be committed to some further position in the philosophy of language: either that 'God' is not a name or that a non-descriptivist theory of reference is correct. Exploring this issue takes us in more detail into work on reference, a subject pursued in Chapter 7. This also gives us the opportunity to consider more generally what should be said about the meaning and reference of 'God' independently of apophatic theology. Our final verdict on whether apophatic theology can adequately respond to this objection therefore has to wait until the end of Part I.

3

Berkeley

Although his work on religious language is often overlooked, George Berkeley offers the most detailed and important account of any of the major early modern philosophers. His ideas on religious language are elaborated in his 1732 dialogue *Alciphron*, but one of the key insights, that certain terms express and evoke non-cognitive attitudes, was already in place in 1710, when he wrote *A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*: ‘Besides, the communicating of ideas marked by words is not the chief and only end of language, as is commonly supposed. There are other ends, as the raising of some passion, the exciting to, or deterring from an action, the putting the mind in some particular disposition’ (1949, p. 37). Berkeley was also the first philosopher of the early modern period to draw attention to the theoretical significance of language that is not representational. However, it is only in his later work *Alciphron*, specifically in his treatment of religious language, that Berkeley combines the idea that certain religious expressions are not representational with a positive expressive/evocative theory of their function. It is this combination that makes Berkeley such an important early figure in the development of attitude theories of religious language. In the pages that follow, I briefly consider the background to Berkeley’s account in John Locke’s theory of language, then set out and evaluate what Berkeley has to say on religious language.

Berkeley and Locke

The background to Berkeley’s account is the theory of communication developed by John Locke in book III of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*. Locke takes language to be an artificial construction of repeatable articulate sounds that facilitate communication by being

used to stand for ideas. 'Besides articulate Sounds, therefore, it was farther necessary, that [man] should be *able to use these Sounds as Signs of internal Conceptions*; and to make them stand as marks for the *Ideas* within his own Mind, whereby they might be made known to others, and the Thoughts of Men's Minds be conveyed from one to another' (1975, 3.1.2). The relation between a word and the idea it stands for is 'arbitrary', insofar as it is established by the choices and conventions of the linguistic community. Once word-idea relations are established, words can be used to record and convey ideas and thereby record and convey the thoughts that they constitute. In general, Locke argues, '*Words in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideas in the Mind of him that uses them*' (1975, 3.2.2).

Locke's theory has been seen as leading to an extreme form of subjectivism. If words stand only for ideas in the mind of the speaker, the upshot seems to be that we can talk only about our own mental states. J. S. Mill expresses the objection as follows: 'When I say, "the sun is the cause of the day", I do not mean that my idea of the sun causes or excites in me the idea of day' (Mill 1973, p. 25). It is often the things in the world about which we are having ideas that we take to be represented in language rather than the ideas that we are having about those things. Locke's theory seems to have the absurd consequence that we can talk, not about things, but only about our ideas of them. Moreover, if a speaker's words signify only his or her own mental states and a hearer understands those words as signifying his or her (that is, the hearer's) own mental states, how is effective communication between speaker and hearer possible?

There are more charitable interpretations of Locke that avoid Mill's objection. For example, Locke claims that words have ideas as their *primary* or *immediate* signification, allowing for the possibility that words might also have things as a (secondary and mediate) signification. According to Kretzmann, 'Once it becomes clear that it is only *immediately* that words signify *nothing but* the user's ideas, it is clear also that where the ideas immediately signified are *themselves* signs – that is, are representative ideas – their originals may be *mediately* signified by those words' (1975, p. 133), Kretzmann takes Locke's thesis to be that words are able to refer to things in the world by virtue of their immediate connection with ideas that represent those things. Far from leading to subjectivism, the immediate signification of ideas facilitates our using words to refer to things. Additionally, Mill's objection interprets Locke as saying that words primarily *refer to* ideas. But a more historically sensitive account of 'signification' suggests that 'refer' should be understood

as a much looser notion, one that not just includes reference but also encompasses representation, expression, and in general the ways in which a word can be meaningful (Ashworth, 1981, p. 310). A word can thereby signify a thing in the world by virtue of referring to it and also signify an idea because the associated idea fixes the reference of the word.

Berkeley on religious language

Berkeley's ideas on religious language are presented in *Alciphron*, part VII, by way of a dialogue between a critic of Christian belief, Alciphron, and Euphranor and Crito, who defend Christian belief and articulate Berkeley's own position. The aim in part VII is to address an argument advanced by Alciphron that the use of religious language in many cases involves 'mere forms of speech, which mean nothing, and are of no use to mankind' (1950, p. 287). The discussion begins with a review of Locke's theory of signification. Alciphron reiterates Locke's point that words stand for ideas: 'He who annexeth a clear idea to every word he makes use of speaks sense; but where such ideas are wanting, the speaker utters nonsense' (1950, p. 287). Moreover, he agrees that communication is achieved by using words 'to raise those ideas in the hearer which are in the mind of the speaker', whereas 'words that suggest no ideas are insignificant' and they 'serve no purpose' (1950, p. 287). That *each word* used should both signify an idea in the mind of the speaker and suggest a similar idea to the hearer is taken as a requirement for the intelligibility, sense, and meaning of discourse. (As we will see presently, while Berkeley is sympathetic with the Lockean account, he relaxes this condition: certain classes of words and some central religious expressions can be significant without standing for or suggesting ideas.) Alciphron goes on to develop the Lockean theory to set up his critique of religious language. He points out, first, that to establish whether an utterance is significant, we need to consider whether the words used have clear corresponding ideas. Second, Alciphron argues that a disinclination to think through what we are saying or hearing can result in the use of words, even ones that are being used to make apparently important distinctions, that lack sense:

Mankind are generally averse from thinking, though apt enough to entertain discourse either in themselves or others: the effect whereof is that their minds are rather stored with names than ideas, the husk of science rather than the thing. And yet these words without

meaning do often make distinctions of parties, the subject-matter of their disputes, and the object of their zeal. (1950, p. 269)

The use of words that fail to signify ideas, according to Alciphron, is 'the most general cause of error'.

Alciphron proceeds by trying to show that this 'general cause of error' is also widely found in Christian language. To do this, he focuses on the key concept of grace. Grace is frequently referred to in the New Testament; it is said to be the gift of God, to influence people's beliefs and actions, and be the means by which salvation is achieved: 'Christianity is styled the covenant or dispensation of grace' (1950, p. 289). However, when he considers what idea corresponds to the word 'grace', Alciphron declares himself at a loss. 'Grace taken in the vulgar sense, either for beauty, or favour, I can easily understand. But when it denotes an active, vital, ruling principle, influencing and operating on the mind of man, distinct from every natural power or motive, I profess myself altogether unable to understand it, or frame any distinct idea of it' (1950, p. 290). Berkeley gives Alciphron two arguments for extending this point more widely to the use of the word 'grace' by Christians. First, when Alciphron considers the meaning of the word 'grace', he finds a 'perfect vacuity or privation of ideas', and on the assumption that human introspective abilities are similar, he argues that when other people reflect on the meaning of the word, they 'would agree with me, that there was nothing in it but an empty name' (1950, p. 290). Second, Alciphron argues – rather more aggressively – that there is no coherent idea of grace available. In saying that grace is something that 'acts' and 'moves' and causes things to happen, for example, Christians are employing words the significations of which seem entirely clear and intelligible when they are employed to describe the behaviour of physical objects. However, it does not follow from this that these words have similarly clear significations when applied to a 'spiritual' thing. On the contrary, to describe a 'spiritual' thing as 'acting' or 'moving' is a 'manifest delusion'. The argument Berkeley is attributing to Alciphron is that in supposing that talk of the causally efficacious properties of grace is contentful, Christians are unjustifiably trading on the familiarity and clarity of these words when talking about physical properties and causal relations between physical objects. When used to elaborate on the nature of grace or describe its nature, these words do not have a clear sense. Alciphron concludes that since we have no clear idea corresponding to the word 'grace', we 'cannot assent to any proposition concerning it' or have any faith about it.

Berkeley, using the character of Euphranor, offers a surprising and intriguing response to Alciphron. He concedes that the word 'grace' does not suggest a clear idea but disputes Alciphron's conclusion that the expression is thereby insignificant or that it cannot be the object of faith. In one respect Berkeley has attributed to Alciphron a straw man argument, since it relies on the implausible assumption that *every* word must stand for an idea to be significant. As Berkeley would have been aware, Locke recognised that this is a mistake, since there are numerous words that contribute to significant discourse but do not stand for or suggest clear or distinct ideas. For example, the words *and* and *but*, Locke noted, 'are not truly, by themselves, the names of any *Ideas*' (1975, 3.7.2), although they clearly play a significant role in communication. Berkeley develops this thought in two ways. First, Berkeley substantially extends the class of words that are useful but for which we have no clear and distinct ideas to include expressions such as *myself*, *will*, *memory*, *love*, *hate*, as well as universals such as *red*, *square*, *number*. In general, Berkeley argues, we lack abstract ideas to correspond to general terms.¹ Second, Berkeley argues that words may be significant by virtue of serving a practical function in 'influencing our conduct and action' while not signifying ideas. To show this, he compares words with counters substituted for money in a betting game, where the players agree to mark the counters to represent particular sums of money. The counters have a useful practical function, because it is both easier to bet using counters than cash and quicker to see the standing of each player and determine the winnings. Evidently, however, it is possible to play the game and use the counters without framing ideas of what the counters represent, even though each counter signifies a sum of money. We can use words, Berkeley suggest, just as we use counters: to guide our conduct and decisions without actually having ideas of what they signify. More generally, he concludes, a discourse 'that directs how to act or excites to the doing or forbearance of an action may, it seems, be useful and significant, although the words whereof it is composed should not bring each a distinct idea into our minds' (1950, p. 292).

Berkeley's response via Euphranor to Alciphron's scepticism about the significance of Christian language of grace is to concede Alciphron's point that we lack a clear idea of grace but to defend the significance of the language of grace on the basis of its practical use. That is, he concedes that 'grace' does not stand for a clear and distinct idea. But the word is nevertheless significant because of its practical role in encouraging conduct in accordance with Christian faith. 'Grace may ... be an

object of our faith, and influence our life and actions, as a principle destructive of evil habits and productive of good ones, although we cannot attain a distinct idea of it' (1950, p. 296). Berkeley goes on to offer a similar account of the Trinity. Again, he thought that we lack a clear idea of what it is, but talk of it is significant because of its practical role in modifying the attitudes and conduct of the faithful.

A man may believe the doctrine of the Trinity, if he finds it revealed in Holy Scripture that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, are God, and that there is but one God, although he doth not frame in his mind any abstract or distinct ideas of trinity, substance, or personality; provided that this doctrine of a Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier makes proper impressions on his mind, producing therein love, hope, gratitude, and obedience, and thereby becomes a lively operative principle, influencing his life and actions, agreeably to that notion of saving faith which is required in a Christian. (1950, p. 297)

Original sin receives a similar treatment:

Original sin, for instance, a man may find it impossible to form an idea of in abstract, or of the manner of its transmission; and yet the belief thereof may produce in his mind a salutary sense of his own unworthiness, and the goodness of his Redeemer: from whence may follow good habits, and from them good actions, the genuine effects of faith. (1950, p. 301)

Berkeley provides us with perhaps the earliest clearly formed version of religious expressivism. Talk of the 'religious mysteries', according to Berkeley, does not represent or describe religious facts but instead serves a practical function of motivating and guiding the faithful to think and act according to Christian principles. They are 'placed in the will and affections rather than in the understanding, and producing holy lives rather than subtle theories' (1950, p. 301). However, Berkeley's account also falls well short of a thoroughgoing expressivism, because he takes this theory to extend only as far as those religious ideas of which we can form no clear idea. Although the examples that he offers are central to Christianity (grace, Trinity, original sin, described above, and the afterlife, which we come to shortly), he does not suggest that his expressivist account should extend substantively further. Regarding the rest of religious discourse, Berkeley offers a thoroughly cognitive

account: religious terms – in particular ‘God’ – correspond to ideas that refer to really existing features of a religious reality. Moreover, Berkeley believes many that Christian claims are not only cognitively contentful but also rationally defensible; notably, *Alciphron* presents an argument for the existence of God. Talk of the Trinity, of grace, and of other religious mysteries is presented as motivating and lending support to the dispositions, attitudes, and practices that form a proper part of a Christian faith that is otherwise rationally justifiable.

Before turning to an evaluation of Berkeley’s theory, there is an important further argument that he develops in support of the positive part of his theory about the practical role of certain core religious expressions. Berkeley points out that his theory has a neat explanation of the motivational effects of faith. Berkeley takes the changes in people’s lives that result from this faith to be evident from examples. ‘Faith, I say, is not an indolent perception, but an operative persuasion of mind, which ever worketh some suitable action, disposition, or emotion in those who have it; as it were easy to prove and illustrate by innumerable instances taken from human affairs’ (1950, p. 301). By construing faith in religious mysteries in terms of the practical effects on the attitudes and dispositions of the faithful, it is clear why this change of behaviour should be the result. Berkeley has here an incomplete version of one of the principal arguments for expressivism – the argument from motivational force – that we turn to in detail in Chapter 5. To illustrate this idea, Berkeley considers the role of faith in effecting a person’s turning away from ‘secular interests and sensual pleasures’ – a result that, he thinks, could only be achieved if faith is a change in non-cognitive attitude rather than a change in belief. He considers the example of a secular person who pursues narrow, self-interested ends. Suppose such a person were presented with the opportunity of obtaining a great fortune by a villainous act that could be committed with impunity and in secrecy. What, Berkeley asks, could persuade a person in this position not to commit this act?² He argues that no theories or ethical arguments about integrity and character, however artfully expressed, are likely to cause this person not to act in self-interest. Belief in salvation, however, can effect a change of heart and motivate a different way of life. This is not achieved by intellectual persuasion but by changing the believer’s attitudes. ‘Do but produce in him a sincere belief of a Future State, although it be a mystery, although it be what eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive, he shall, nevertheless, by virtue of such belief, be withheld from executing his wicked

project: and that for reasons which all men can comprehend, though nobody can be the object of them' (1950, VII.10). As this quotation implies, Berkeley takes belief in the afterlife to be belief in a mystery such as grace, about which we have no clear corresponding idea.

Objections

How successful is Berkeley's attitude theory of religious language? To begin with, there are two areas of difficulty with the formulation of his theory: the first concerns the positive, practical part of his account of religious language; the second is his reliance on a Lockean theory of language.

There are a couple of puzzling aspects to Berkeley's account of the practical benefits of faith in religious mysteries. One obvious worry is that he characterises Christian attitudes towards them as *belief*: it is a Christian's *belief* in the Trinity, in original sin, in grace or in the afterlife from which changes in attitudes and conduct – gratitude, obedience, and so on – are claimed to flow. However, if Berkeley is sympathetic to Alciphron's argument that we have no clear idea of what the Trinity is, then why does he not also accept Alciphron's conclusion that the Trinity cannot be an object of faith (or, for similar reasons, belief)? There seems to be an important piece of Berkeley's argument missing here. Perhaps the most satisfactory response available to Berkeley is to distinguish between two types of representational mental states that our normal, unphilosophical use of 'belief' does not separate. He hints at this distinction when he contrasts the behaviourally 'inert' nature of beliefs with the 'lively operative principle' that characterises beliefs in religious mysteries. The two types of mental state are (a) 'input' states, which represent how one takes the world to be, and (b) 'output' mental states, which represent ways that one would like the world to be. While the former are descriptive and aim to track properties in the world, the latter concern our goals and are inherently motivational. On this modification of Berkeley's theory, he is arguing that many religious beliefs (including most beliefs about God but not beliefs about religious mysteries) are input beliefs. Whereas beliefs in religious mysteries – such as the belief that God is three persons, distinct and co-eternal – are output beliefs, or desires to make Christian principles of conduct governing standards in one's behaviour and attitudes. So Berkeley concedes to Alciphron that we cannot have input beliefs in religious mysteries but argues that it is wrong to suppose we cannot have output beliefs in them.

Another perplexing feature of Berkeley's theory is that while he writes at length on the positive effects in conduct and attitudes prompted in hearers by talking about religious mysteries, he does not say what is being communicated by speakers. On the basis of what he says about talk of religious mysteries, he might be taken as offering a *purely evocative* account of their meaning: their meaning is the effect they provoke in others. But it is difficult to see how a purely evocative theory of the meaning of talk about religious mysteries could be defended or even what it would look like. Consider, for example, using the expression 'Oi!' (usually with a raised voice) to catch someone's attention. Although the utterance does not have a representational content, it reliably evokes an immediate response in most hearers. But this seems like a non-starter as a model for interpreting talk about religious mysteries. 'Oi!' is capable of capturing a hearer's attention by causing the hearer to be surprised by the utterance; in contrast, it is unclear why talk of the Trinity should prompt a change in hearers, let alone the life-changing changes in attitudes that Berkeley suggests its use is capable of effecting, or how talk of different mysteries should produce distinct effects. Moreover, a purely evocative theory seems to have no explanation for how we can meaningfully explain the details of the doctrine of original sin or of the Trinity, for example, or get into disputes about them. It seems preferable, therefore, to regard Berkeley's lack of comment on the expressive meaning of talk about religious mysteries as an omission. Fortunately, there is an obvious way of developing his theory. Berkeley takes successful communication to consist in the use of words that signify similar ideas in the mind of the speaker and of the hearer. So a natural way of extending his account of talk of religious mysteries is to suppose that it expresses the same attitudes of obedience, gratitude, love, and so on, that their use is intended to prompt in hearers.

We have noted some of the problems with the crude Lockean theory of language that informs Berkeley's discussion. Berkeley's own proposals for the meaning of talk about religious mysteries are also infelicitously presented as a theory about particular *words* and what they signify. Suppose, for example, we take Berkeley to be arguing that talk of original sin should be understood as expressing Christian attitudes (that one is unworthy, for example) and evoking attitudes and habits in accordance with Christian principles. This does not seem to comfortably fit with his argument that we have no clear ideas corresponding to the *words* 'original sin'. This becomes clear when we consider uses of the expression that are not tied to the possession,

communication, or encouragement of any Christian attitudes or habits. For instance, 'He does not believe in original sin', 'Original sin has been disproved by science', and 'The doctrine of original sin has scriptural origins in the works of St Paul'. These judgements do not express (or evoke) Christian attitudes, but presumably the use of the expression 'original sin' is no less significant in these sentences than in ones used to express Christian belief in the doctrine. Berkeley leaves us without an account of the meaning of 'original sin' when not expressing Christian belief. However, even if such an account were forthcoming, it is unclear how the expressions 'original sin', 'The Trinity', and 'grace' contribute to the meanings of sentences of which they are a part. Take, for example,

1. There are three persons in the Trinity.

What is meant by uttering this sentence? Berkeley's theory seems to give (1) a fragmentary content: *There are three persons in the ...* without an explanation of how to fill in 'Trinity' to give an intelligible thought.

Suppose, therefore, that we revise Berkeley's framing of his position so that we interpret the meaning of *sentences* as the states of mind they conventionally express. This theory, while still Lockean in spirit, avoids the obvious difficulties that result from taking each word to communicate a distinct idea. Suitably modified, we could take Berkeley to be arguing that sentences that conventionally express belief in the Christian mysteries should be understood, not as offering descriptions or describing religious facts, but as expressing and evoking attitudes which are conducive to and motivate a Christian way of life. In other words, that the mental states that these sentences express are 'output' rather than 'input' beliefs, or non-cognitive attitudes. This revised account can better address the two problems raised above. The difficulty with understanding the content of non-religious talk of the religious mysteries disappears because these utterances do not express religious beliefs. The problem with interpreting a sentence like (1) also goes away because it is taken to express an input belief not with a fragmentary propositional content but with a range of attitudes favourable to Christian conduct.

Even with these revisions, Berkeley's expressivism needs to address obvious *differences* in the meanings of sentences. For example, consider this sentence:

2. It is through grace that we are absolved of our sins.

The expressivist interpretation of this sentence must be different:

3. It is through grace that we receive eternal salvation.

Otherwise his theory will be unable to account for the obvious difference in the meaning of (2) and (3). The success of the theory will in part depend on whether such differences in meaning can be extracted from the proposed non-cognitive resources of feelings, dispositions, and attitudes. In general, Berkeley needs to posit a mapping of each religious sentence with a distinct meaning to which his expressivist theory extends onto distinct groups of non-cognitive attitudes that provide the interpretation of those sentences. Call this the *expressive function*. The expressive function relates a sentence for which an expressive interpretation is appropriate to the distinct class of non-cognitive attitudes that provide that interpretation. Is it plausible for Berkeley to suppose that there is an expressive function that will do the job of interpreting sentences about the Christian mysteries? Berkeley does go some way towards addressing this question. The non-cognitive states that he proposes are evoked by talk about original sin are different to those that he proposes are evoked by talking about the Trinity. Original sin, Berkeley claims, produces an impression of a salutary sense of unworthiness, while the Trinity produces love, hope, gratitude, and obedience. On grace and the afterlife Berkeley is less informative; both are taken to promote moral action and disincline one to act immorally, but the non-cognitive attitudes that they evoke are not clearly distinguished. However, Berkeley's task does not seem insurmountable. His estimation of the non-cognitive states in question seems to be based on the proper responses and feelings of people believing in the mysteries in question. It seems that Berkeley could in principle use this method to identify relevant distinctive non-cognitive states sufficient to individuate sentences about grace and the afterlife from original sin and the Trinity.

One of the distinctive characteristics of Berkeley's account is his attempt to develop an expressivist theory for only a limited region of religious language while retaining a cognitivist account for the rest. As such, Berkeley's attitude theory is less comprehensive in its treatment of religious language than expressivism. Let's call this a *hybrid* theory. There are two pressing problems for a hybrid theory. The first is to find a way of differentiating areas of religious language that should be given a descriptive interpretation from those that should be given a non-cognitive interpretation. The second is to explain how areas of religious

language that should be given a non-cognitive interpretation are meaningfully related to those areas of religious language (and non-religious language) that have a cognitive interpretation.

As we have seen, Berkeley (in the guise of Alciphron) sets out two ways of answering the first problem. One is that insofar as religious discourse applies expressions usually employed in talking about physical objects to non-physical objects, the results are incoherent, and we do not express (input) beliefs. Alciphron suggests that talk of the religious mysteries is particularly prone to such confusion; this prompts Berkeley to propose a non-cognitive interpretation of it. As an argument for hybrid theory, however, this is a misstep. Many objections have been raised to the coherence of various religious beliefs ranging from beliefs about divine properties, such as the problem for omnipotence raised by the paradox of the stone (Savage, 1967), to specific matters of beliefs about religious doctrine, such as John Hick's critique of the doctrine of the Incarnation (Hick, 1977). But these arguments do not lend support to the theory that sentences about divine omnipotence or the Incarnation are expressive of non-cognitive states. To the contrary, these arguments are presented on the assumption that such sentences aim to represent religious facts and express beliefs, and they are used to show that these beliefs are incoherent and thereby false. Far from lending support to hybrid theory, a successful argument about the incoherence of claims about Christian mysteries implies their falsity.

Berkeley's other answer to the first problem proceeds by an introspective experiment. We reflect on what we are thinking when we talk about the Christian mysteries and find that we lack clear ideas or beliefs. However, this too seems unsatisfactory. One difficulty is that even if we suppose the meaning of sentences is tied to the mental states they conventionally express, it is implausible to say that these must be *occurrent* mental states in speakers. A sentence can be used to communicate a thought even if the speaker is not having that thought during the utterance of it. For instance, a speaker can say something unreflectively or with an unintended meaning. Moreover, it seems possible to use a sentence to communicate a thought that the speaker has never had. For example, in using a racial slur a speaker communicates contempt for the group of people referred to by the slur even if the speaker does not and never has had contempt for that group. However, even if introspection were a useful device for determining the meaning of a sentence, it is difficult to see how it could be effectively used to distinguish between sentences with cognitive and non-cognitive content. There is no general agreement about which religious

expressions or sentences we are sufficiently clear to make them suitable vehicles for expressing religious (input) beliefs. Nor does Berkeley identify anything that specifically characterises the Christian mysteries as matters on which speakers have much less clear ideas than many of the other ideas that form part of religious belief, not least the ideas of God and divine properties. Berkeley does not, therefore, have a successful method for discriminating religious ideas and thoughts that are cognitively contentful from those that are not.

Further difficulty for hybrid theory comes from the *logic* objection. Because the theory is offering a non-cognitive account of some religious claims but not others, how should we interpret sentences with cognitive and non-cognitive components or explain the logical relationships between cognitive and non-cognitive religious sentences? Suppose, for example, we follow Berkeley giving a face value account of

4. God is good.

That is, (4) is conventionally used to express the belief that God is good. And suppose that we follow Berkeley in giving a non-cognitive interpretation of

5. Salvation is given by divine grace.

That is, (5) is conventionally used to express various non-cognitive attitudes (according to the expressive function) and encourage moral behaviour in others. How then should (6) be interpreted?

6. If God is good, then salvation is given by divine grace.

The hybrid theory has two problems. This sentence combines (4) and (5) in a conditional sentence, but since the consequent is taken to express an attitude, it is unclear how it should be understood. This is so because one can assert (6) without expressing the attitude in (5); one might, for example, think that the antecedent and consequent are false but nevertheless think that (6) is true because *if* the antecedent were true, *then* the consequent would be true. It seems, therefore, that if the hybrid theorist is right that (5) expresses a non-cognitive attitude, it must have a different meaning in (6), where it is not tied to the expression of any attitude. This brings us to a second problem: that (4) and (6) together entail (5). Together these sentences make an evidently valid *modus ponens* argument. However,

if (5) means something different when asserted and when embedded in the conditional (6), this argument is invalid. More generally, the hybrid theory looks to be in difficulty when trying to explain the meaning of conditionals or valid arguments that contain expressive and cognitive religious sentences. This argument is a relation of the Frege-Geach argument that we turn to in Chapter 6.

4

Braithwaite and Verificationism

Braithwaite is perhaps the best-known religious attitude theorist and was the first to explicitly defend a thoroughgoing expressivist theory of religious language. However, his theory proceeds from a largely uncritical acceptance of the verificationist theory of meaning endorsed by the logical positivists. This theory, popularised by A. J. Ayer in *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936; 2nd edition 1946), was argued by him to show that religious *statements* – his term for indicative sentences – are ‘literally meaningless’. Although this form of verificationism was thoroughly discredited by the 1940s, it is historically important both for its enormous impact on philosophy of religion of the time and for its continued extraordinary influence on the field into the late 20th century. Moreover, while the verificationist arguments used in support of Braithwaite’s expressivism are unsuccessful, in its details Braithwaite’s version of religious expressivism is interesting both for its contribution to the development of religious attitude theories and as a model of expressivism for which other arguments might be found. My objectives in this chapter are therefore partly philosophical and partly historical:

What is the logical positivist position, why was it taken to pose such a threat to religious belief, and what were the reasons for its philosophical demise?

Why did the logical positivist critique of religion have such a major and continuing impact in the philosophy of religion?

What is Braithwaite’s expressivist version of attitude theory?

Is Braithwaite’s theory defensible?

Logical positivism and religious language

According to Ayer, a statement is factually contentful if and only if it is empirically verifiable. A statement is empirically verifiable if what it says

can in principle be shown to be true or false by observation. Ayer also allows for logically necessary statements – for example, statements of the form ‘ p is true or p is not true’; these are not verifiable but are nevertheless necessarily true. Necessary statements, he argued, are analytic, or true by virtue of the meaning of their constituent terms. They do not thereby report any factual information; as he puts it, ‘none of them provide any information about any matter of fact’ (1946, p. 79). Ayer encapsulated the verificationist theory of meaning with the infamous *empirical verification principle*: a statement has literal meaning if and only if it expresses a proposition that is either analytically true (and thereby factually uninformative) or empirically verifiable. However, Ayer sometimes exaggerated the predicament of statements that failed to satisfy this principle, even on its own terms, characterising them not just as ‘literally meaningless’ but occasionally as ‘nonsense’.

Ayer’s chief target was metaphysics, and he rather ambitiously titled the first chapter of his book ‘The Elimination of Metaphysics’. Metaphysics was taken to be made up of statements that concern the nature of a reality that falls beyond the scope of science to investigate. Examples of metaphysical issues include the existence of the external world, the number of substances that there are in the world, whether the world is made up of ideas, and the reality of propositions or universals. Because theories on these issues are not empirically verifiable, Ayer took them to lack ‘factual meaning’; they should, he thought, be eliminated as a topic of debate. Other conspicuous victims of the application of the verification principle were ethical, aesthetic, and religious statements none of which, so Ayer argued, are susceptible to verification and are thereby similarly factually meaningless.¹

However, Ayer also has a positive story to tell about ethical statements. Although he took ethical statements to be unverifiable descriptions of normative facts that fail the empirical verification principle as other metaphysical statements do, he argued that they have a distinct non-descriptive function of expressing approval or disapproval. That is, while an ethical predicate ‘adds nothing to the literal meaning of the sentence’, it is a useful device for giving voice to one’s attitudes as well as encouraging attitudes of approval or disapproval in others. For example, in saying ‘Stealing money is wrong’,

I produce a sentence which has no factual meaning – that is, expresses no proposition which can be either true or false. It is as if I had written ‘Stealing money ! !’ – where the shape and thickness of the exclamation marks show, by a suitable convention, that a special

sort of moral disapproval is the feeling which is being expressed. It is clear that there is nothing said here which can be true or false. (1946, p. 107)

Ayer's 'emotivist' theory of ethics provides a role for ethical language that is consistent with the verification principle. Although Ayer does not put it this way himself, it also provides Ayer with an answer to the tricky problem of what to do with ethical discourse if it lacks literal content. Specifically, emotivism offers an alternative to arguing for the unappealing prospect that ethical discourse should be eliminated, along with other areas of metaphysics. Verificationists need not dispense with normative expressions because of their significance in expressing approval and disapproval. Notably, Ayer goes on to extend his emotivism to aesthetic language: 'Such aesthetic words as 'beautiful' and 'hideous' are employed, as ethical words are employed, not to make statements of fact, but simply to express certain feelings and evoke a certain response' (1946, p. 113). What of religious language? Ayer is silent on this issue, implying that religious language should be dispensed with as the language of other areas of metaphysics is. It is here that Braithwaite comes in, by setting out an emotivist account of religious language, the corollary of Ayer's emotivism for ethics and aesthetics, albeit with some important differences. We look at these differences and details of Braithwaite's theory later in this chapter.

Logical positivism was briefly in vogue in the 1930s but quickly ran into intractable difficulties. That something is seriously awry with the verification principle is shown when we apply to it its own standards. The verification principle is *itself* neither empirically verifiable nor analytically true, so is literally meaningless according to its own criterion. This is a remarkable example of being hoist by one's own petard that, as Ayer later conceded, was overlooked at the time the principle was formulated. However, the central reason for the theory's collapse was the failure to come up with a workable version of the verification principle. Suppose that we say that a statement is factually meaningful if it can be *conclusively verified*, where we take a statement, S, to be conclusively verified if some set of observation statements, O, entails S. An observation statement is one that reports an actual or possible sensory experience. Then universal generalisations, such as 'copper expands when heated', that cover an unlimited number of instances will fail to satisfy the verification principle. This is so because any finite number of observations of copper expanding when heated will at most establish the high probability of the generalisation. Since we are in a position

to observe only a finite number of copper-heat interactions that have occurred or will occur, the statement cannot be conclusively verified.² Similarly, while it may be possible to show that statements about the distant past are highly probable, they cannot be conclusively verified. Taking conclusive verifiability as a condition of factual content, therefore, would render a large number of important scientific statements literally meaningless.

In response to this difficulty, Ayer proposed a less demanding criterion according to which a statement *S* must be *weakly verified* to be factually contentful. A statement is weakly verifiable if observation statements can be deduced from it in conjunction with certain additional premises which cannot be deduced from those premises alone. The formulation of weak verifiability may sound counter-intuitive, but we can see why Ayer is led to it by the failure of conclusive verifiability. Ayer is trying to capture the idea that to be meaningful a statement must make a difference to the truth or falsity of some observation statements. So, for example, if we take the generalisation 'copper expands when heated' as the premise of an argument and the additional premise 'there is a piece of copper on the table', we can deduce the observation statement 'if the piece of copper on the table is heated it will expand'. This latter observation statement is in principle testable and cannot be deduced from the additional premise alone. The generalisation, therefore, adds information to the additional premise that can be tested by observation. It is therefore weakly verifiable and, according to Ayer's reformulated verification principle, factually contentful. Unfortunately for Ayer, the upshot of weakening the verification principle is to allow *any* statement to be (weakly) verifiable. For if we take a statement *S* and an observation statement *O*, then with the additional premise 'If *S* then *O*', we can deduce *O* from *S*. Since *O* follows from *S* and the premise 'If *S* then *O*' but could not be deduced from just 'If *S* then *O*', it follows that *S* is weakly verifiable. For instance, take the statement 'God is merciful' and the observation statement 'The next lottery ticket I buy will win the jackpot'. The observation statement can be deduced from 'God is merciful' using the additional premise 'If God is merciful then the next lottery ticket I buy will win the jackpot' but could not be deduced from 'God is merciful' alone. It follows that 'God is merciful' is weakly verifiable. We do not, of course, need to believe that the supplementary premise is true. Ayer is seeking to give us a criterion for the meaningfulness of statements; the actual truth or falsity of the additional premise is not at issue. The same form of argument can be employed to show

that any religious statement – indeed, any statement whatsoever – is weakly verifiable.

The obvious way to counter this objection is to place a restriction on the additional premises that can be used in conjunction with *S* to entail further observation statements. Accordingly, in the second edition of *Language, Truth and Logic*, Ayer had another go. *S* is *directly verifiable* if it is either an observation statement or if *S* entails, in conjunction with a class of observation statements, an observation statement that is not entailed by that class of statements alone. *S* is *indirectly verifiable* if in conjunction with a class of other statements it entails a directly verifiable statement not entailed by the statements in that class alone *and* if there is no statement in that class which is not either (a) directly verifiable or (b) analytic or (c) capable of being independently shown to be indirectly verifiable. He then reformulated the verification principle as saying that to be literally meaningful, a statement must be analytic or else either directly or indirectly verifiable (1946, p. 13). This modified version, however, was subsequently demolished by Alonzo Church (1949). Take three logically independent observation statements *O*1, *O*2, and *O*3 and a statement *P*, which can be any statement whatsoever. Now consider the sentence

1. (not-*O*1 & *O*2) v (*O*3 & not-*P*).

*O*1 in conjunction with (1) entails an observation statement *O*3 that is not entailed by *O*1 alone (because *O*1 and *O*3 are logically independent). So it follows from the definition above that (1) is directly verifiable. But *P* in conjunction with (1) entails *O*2, which is not entailed by *P* alone; *P* thereby satisfies the condition of weak verifiability and in turn the modified empirical verification principle. As before, *P* could stand for any statement.³

This brings us to the question why religious statements should be held by verificationists to fall foul of the verification principle. If Ayer's contentious claims about the factual contentfulness of religious statements are to hold water, even on the assumption that the verification principle is correct, he needs to establish that religious statements are neither necessarily true nor verifiable. Let's grant Ayer that most statements about God that are affirmed by religious believers are not necessarily true. Why can't religious statements legitimately be regarded as scientific hypotheses? Religious sentences do in many cases appear to describe features of the world that should have implications for what is or should be observable, such as the creation of the world or God's

intervention in it. It seems, therefore, that many of them should be in as good a position to satisfy the standards of literal content set up by the empirical verification principle as other scientific hypotheses. Ayer's reply to this argument is surprisingly terse. Suppose, he argues, that the truth of some religious statement is claimed to have observable results. Let us say, for example, that 'God exists' entails that there should be observable regularities in nature. But if that were *all* that the sentence 'God exists' entailed, then, Ayer contends, 'to assert the existence of a god will be simply equivalent to ascertain that there is the requisite regularity in nature' (1946, p. 115). He goes on to point out that this is clearly not all that religious believers intend to assert in claiming that God exists. Instead, believers claim that God is a transcendent being that cannot be defined in terms of observable manifestations. 'But in that case the term "god" is a metaphysical term. And if "god" is a metaphysical term, then it cannot be even probable that a god exists.'

Given the problems with Ayer's theory of meaning, religious believers are put under no pressure by his argument to justify the meaningfulness or literal or factual content of what they say. However, it is interesting to see that Ayer's own argument for supposing that religious statements are not theoretical or probabilistic involves a significant shift from his advertised position on verification. Hitherto, the verification principle is presented as a way of demarcating sense from nonsense. Whether a statement satisfies the principle is the means by which we determine whether it has literal content. But in arguing against the verifiability of religious statements, Ayer relies on the assumption that the verification principle provides the means for specifying their content: the content of a statement is given by the observation statements that (in combination with other assumptions) can be deduced from it. He concedes, in effect, that religious statements are verifiable but claims that their intended content is not exhausted by the content that can be given in terms of observation claims. In this respect, religious statements are in good company. The intended content of scientific statements that posit theoretical entities not directly observable – electrons, forces, and so on – is similarly not exhausted by the observation statements that are derivable from them.

Verificationism and the philosophy of religion

By the mid-20th century the attempt to formulate a general criterion of meaningfulness was widely seen as a hopeless task. However, worries about the meaningfulness of religious statements continued to exert a

remarkable influence on work in the philosophy of religion, with papers and books concerned with the verifiability (or related ideas of falsifiability) and factual content of religious statements being produced well into the second half of the 20th century.⁴ Why, therefore, did logical positivism cast such a long shadow on work in philosophy of religion? The continued concern with the challenges raised by a discredited theory of meaning, long after it had been discarded in other fields of philosophy, may appear difficult to explain; understanding why this should be the case is a point of both historical and philosophical interest. There are, I think two important issues underlying Ayer's critique of religious language that make it clearer why his work should have had such an impact. Both of them, however, concern the broader issue of how the meaning of religious statements is related to the evidence that can in principle lend support to them (and what kind of evidence that is) rather than the attempt to draw a sharp line between meaningful and meaningless or 'nonsense' statements. So let us put aside Ayer's radical claims about the consequences for statements that fail to satisfy the verification principle; as even Ayer conceded, these claims are tendentious, since there is no compelling argument for treating the verification principle as the only standard of meaningfulness (1946, p. 15).

The first issue (with which Part II is also concerned) concerns the relationship between the methods employed to verify religious statements and their content. This relationship is central to a critical point of disagreement between two opposing ideas about religious language (and other areas of language) that have characterised much of the post-war theoretical debate. One of these is that the content of a religious utterance is essentially related to our ability to establish its truth. The idea is, of course, apparent in the verificationist theory, whereby factual content depends on the empirical verifiability of what is said. But it is also found in the works of philosophers of religion in the Wittgensteinian tradition. The view is not that religious statements have to be capable of *empirical* verification or that they should in general be subject to scientific standards to be truth-apt. Rather, verification is construed much more liberally to include various methods of establishing a statement as true, irrespective of their scientific respectability. So while this approach shares with verificationism the idea that the interpretation of a religious statement requires information about its method of verification, it rejects the verificationists' insistence that empirical verification alone is acceptable. This issue became a key theme, not just in the philosophy of religion, but also in the 'linguistic turn' of analytic philosophy in the mid-20th century.⁵ Opposing this tradition is what we may call a 'realist'

approach, according to which the content of an utterance and our ability to establish its truth are independent: a religious assertion may be true even if it is in principle impossible to verify. The latter 'realist' idea has been in the ascendency in Anglo-American philosophy in recent decades and is now often the default assumption about religion language.

The second issue becomes clearer when we consider the motivations for constructing a criterion of factual content. Consider the empiricist theory that our knowledge of the world and our ideas about it derive from experience. If one is an empiricist, then the distinction between sentences suitable for experiential evaluation and those which are not looks like an important matter, and the task of finding a method of determining which sentences fall into which class looks like a legitimate endeavour. Moreover, it is clearly a matter of interest whether religious sentences are in the former class or the latter. Ayer's own attempts to demarcate the classes by appealing to observation statements and statements with certain entailment relationships with observation statements may now appear hopelessly naive in the light of subsequent literature on the theory-ladenness of observation reports (as argued by, for example, Kuhn [1962]). However, if we take the widely held (if optimistic) view that theoretical science is capable of providing us with knowledge by discovering and explaining features of the world and that the credibility of a scientific theory is based upon testing its predictions, then there needs to be *some* distinctive class of observation sentences, even if they are not entirely theory free. Crispin Wright puts the point as follows:

Observation, however 'theoretically conditioned', remains epistemologically basic in science. There may be no timeless class of observation statements, no privileged vocabulary of observation, no such thing as observational confirmation of a statement without theoretical presupposition. But there is, at each given point in our history, *some* notion of a range of states of affairs which can be observed to obtain, to which the current scientific theory – according to our ordinary thinking – is experimentally accountable but which it is held not exclusively to concern. (1989, pp. 620–1)

As Wright goes on to argue, this view of scientific knowledge cannot survive unless we can make sense of the class of observation statements (however we construe them) making a difference to the truth values of the class of theoretical statements that we take to be capable of delivering knowledge about the world. Exaggerated though Ayer's attempts to label the sentences that fall outside the latter class 'meaningless' may

be, the verification principle was an attempt – or series of attempts – to precisely formulate this relationship. Unsurprisingly, given the interest of this project, there have been subsequent attempts to formulate a verification principle (though one not tied to extravagant claims about meaningfulness).⁶

The history of successfully undermining different versions of the verification principle suggests that there may be no precise way of formulating the relationship between, on the one hand, observation reports and, on the other hand, theoretical sentences that express facts not directly observable but in some relevant way amenable to assessment by evidence acquired by observation. Notwithstanding the failure of these attempts, the question whether sentences that express widely held religious beliefs belong in the latter class is an appropriately important concern in the philosophy of religion; it goes some way to explaining the continuing occupation with the verifiability and falsifiability of religious sentences.

Braithwaite

Braithwaite's non-cognitivist account of religious language builds on Ayer's discussion of ethics, aesthetics, and religion in *Language, Truth and Logic*. As we have seen, Ayer adopts an emotivist theory of ethics and aesthetics. Even though ethical and aesthetic statements are not descriptive, Ayer argues, they have the important function of giving voice to our non-cognitive attitudes of approval and disapproval. However, Ayer does not pay religious language the same courtesy. Having argued that religious statements lack factual content, he offers no positive non-cognitive theory of their meaning. It is here that Braithwaite steps in. He addresses an asymmetry between Ayer's treatment of religion and his treatment of ethics and aesthetics by developing an expressivist account of the former.

We have seen that the verificationist critique of religion is entirely unsuccessful and for this reason does motivate an expressivist account of religion. However, even if Braithwaite's attitude theory for religion is inadequately motivated, his theory merits consideration in its own right. It is interesting to find whether there is a workable form of religious expressivism – that is, one that has satisfactory answers to the generic problems raised in the introduction – independently of whether there are persuasive arguments for the theory. Notably, in contemporary metaethics Ayer's ethical emotivism is considered a variety of expressivism and an important theoretical option for how to interpret the

meaning of ethical statements; the logical positivist baggage is largely discarded and replaced with other lines of argument. This is a philosophically interesting but ahistorical treatment of Ayer's account of the meaning of ethics statements. Ayer does not advance emotivism about ethical statements as giving the whole story about their meaning. Instead, he argues, on the basis of the verification principle, that moral statements systematically fail in representing normative facts; emotivism addresses the issue of why, consistently with this verificationist critique, we should continue to use ethical language.

Braithwaite's account of religious language is modelled on Ayer's ethical emotivism, but he modifies the theory. Rather than take ethical sentences to express non-cognitive attitudes of approval or disapproval, Braithwaite claims that 'what is primary is [the believer's] intention to perform the action when the occasion for it arises' (1955, p. 12). The intention to pursue a course of action is what is expressed by a moral statement. Someone who claims, for example, that we should act to maximize happiness is, not asserting a proposition or even evincing any particular feeling of approval towards such conduct, but rather subscribing to the behaviour policy of maximising happiness. Braithwaite's departure from Ayer's emotivism parallels a more recent theoretical contrast between the ethical expressivism of Simon Blackburn (1984, 1993a) and the norm expressivism of Allan Gibbard (1990). Blackburn's expressivism, although in a number of important details a significant improvement on Ayer's account, shares the same basic approach of taking ethical sentences to be expressive of non-cognitive attitudes of approval and disapproval (we reviewed this idea in Chapter 1). In saying (2) a speaker does not express the belief that lying is wrong but instead expresses an attitude of disapproval towards lying.

2. Lying is wrong.

This can be represented as

3. B! (lying).

where 'B!' (or boohoo!) stands for the expression of disapproval towards the bracketed content. Gibbard, in contrast, argues that moral sentences (and normative sentences in general, including sentences about what is rational) are used to express *plans*. Plans are our views on the thing to do in various circumstances. Gibbard's position is legitimately seen as a form of expressivism, because he is arguing that moral sentences do

not represent moral facts and are not used to express beliefs in moral facts. Instead, they express planning states of mind: what we rule in and rule out, what we take to be permissible and what is to be rejected as different circumstances arise. Unlike Blackburn and Ayer, for Gibbard the mental states expressed in moral discourse are planning states rather than attitudes of approval and disapproval. Similarly, for Braithwaite moral sentences are used to express policy commitments.

Braithwaite takes the same approach to religious sentences. He proposes that '[t]he religious assertion is used as a moral assertion' (1955, p. 11). So as with ethical statements, religious statements are 'primarily declarations of adherence to a policy of action, declarations of commitment to a way of life' (1955, p. 15). For example, Braithwaite proposes that the assertion 'God is love' expresses not a belief about God but the intention to follow an agapeistic way of life. However, Braithwaite recognises that religious discourse is frequently concerned with religious matters that do not seem to be related to behavioural conduct – for example, claims about important religious figures and their life stories, such as the Gospel narratives of the life of Jesus, parables, accounts of the creation and of the end of the world, historical events of religious significance, and so on. Braithwaite calls talk of these subjects *stories* (with the aim, he says, of using a neutral expression rather than a disparaging one). He admits that stories have propositional content and do not express intentions. Moreover, he allows that they are empirically testable, thereby granting them the status of empirical propositions. However, he makes two points. First, he claims that these stories are 'associated in the mind' of the religious believer with intentions to behave. The primary role of stories, according to Braithwaite, is to provide models of exemplary behaviour (or behaviour to avoid) that serve as psychological assistance for believers to act on their intentions. Second, while religious stories do have cognitive content, he thinks that the truth of that content is not crucial to the action-guiding role that they play in religious discourse. The following comments are illustrative:

it is not necessary, on my view, for the asserter of a religious assertion to believe in the truth of the story involved in the assertions: what is necessary is that the story should be entertained in thought. (1955, p. 26)

The reference to the story is not an assertion of the story as a matter of empirical fact: it is a telling of the story, or an alluding to the story, in the way in which one can tell, or allude to, the story of a novel with which one is acquainted. (1955, p. 24)

So it is not essential that the speaker believe that the stories are true, provided that they are entertained when considering the relevant behaviour policies. Braithwaite is not, therefore, a pure expressivist about religion; he combines an expressivist theory of a range of core religious beliefs and doctrinal claims with a theory of religious 'stories' as useful fictions. We return to the topic of fictionalism in Part III.

In general, therefore, Braithwaite treats statements about God as moral statements, with the difference that religious statements are often associated by their speakers with various stories. 'A religious belief is an intention to behave in a certain way (a moral belief) together with the entertainment of certain stories associated with the intention in the mind of the believer' (1955, p. 32).

Objections

The application of Braithwaite's version of attitude theory to religious language looks seriously problematic. One obvious problem is his suggestion that 'stories' are not asserted to be true by religious believers. This seems quite implausible. While many religious believers might not believe that all of the 'stories' that make up the religious traditions of which they are a part are true in all details, most religious believers take at least some of them to be true and, moreover, take themselves to be asserting the truth of those stories. For example, many Christians believe that God created the world but would defer to science on when the world was created; some Christians believe the schedule of creation given in the Genesis creation story and that the event can be assigned a date on the basis of biblical scholarship. These beliefs are sincere and do not seem to be entertained merely as fictions. Braithwaite would perhaps respond that Christians are thereby mistaken in their beliefs and ought to treat the creation story as a fiction. But if he took that position, he would no longer be offering an account of the meaning of religious sentences and utterances but offering a recommendation about the attitudes that should be taken towards religious stories.

One upshot of Braithwaite's account of religious discourse is that if two religious believers associate different behavioural intentions with the same religious statement, then they will mean different things by that statement. For example, suppose that John and James believe the statement

4. Humanity is in a state of sin resulting from the Fall of Man.

John associates the statement with a plan to improve his moral standards, while James associates it with a plan to reinforce his participation in churchgoing, prayer, and other religious activities. According to Braithwaite, (4) uttered by John will mean something different to (4) uttered by James. Braithwaite appears happy to accept this result, but the consequence is that the sentence (4) has no determinate propositional content. We are unable to tell what it means until we know what behaviour policy is associated with it. Conversely, if different religious statements express the intention to pursue the *same* behaviour policy, then the statements will mean the same. Take the statement

5. Humanity is not in a state of sin because of the atonement of Jesus Christ.

If John associates (4) with a plan to improve his moral standards, then it seems to follow from Braithwaite's theory that he means the same by (4) and by (5) even though these statements appear to be inconsistent. Braithwaite seems to make religious language the victim of humpty-dumptyism. When Alice asks Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* what he means by 'glory', he claims to mean 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'. When Alice complains that is not the meaning of 'glory', Humpty Dumpty responds, 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less'. It seems that what is wrong with this is that the constitutive expressions and sentences of religious language must have some standing meaning that is independent of the behavioural policies of speakers. Notably, this is not a problem for expressivism in general but only for Braithwaite's way of developing it. Ayer and Blackburn, for example, take judgements about what is good to be conventionally tied to the expression of approval. These linguistic conventions stand irrespective of the mental states of the speaker.

Perhaps the most serious difficulty for Braithwaite's account is the 'positive account' problem identified in Chapter One. Braithwaite is rather sketchy about the intentions expressed by different religious statements, instead focusing on what makes a statement distinctively Christian. He answers the latter by proposing that Christian statements express an intention to pursue an agapeistic way of life (1955, pp. 21–2). But there seem to be an arbitrary number of distinct Christian statements with distinct meanings. Equipped with only *one* plan, Braithwaite's theory will have *all* Christian claims (or at least all doctrinal claims) meaning the same since they will all be associated with the same plan. Could Braithwaite distinguish the meaning of different religious statements by

virtue of the stories that the believer associates with them? This rapidly runs into serious difficulties, similar to the ones explored above. It seems possible to assert a religious statements such as (6) or (7) without associating it with *any* story.

6. God is omnipotent.

7. God is plentiful.

A theist with no affiliation to a religious tradition might have various beliefs about God without associating those beliefs with any literature or collection of stories. Moreover, (7) might be associated by a believer with the story of the feeding of the five thousand in the Gospel of Matthew on one occasion but later associate it with the story of the feeding of the four thousand in the Gospel of Mark. It would follow that the claim means something different on each occasion. Similarly, if one believer claims that God is plentiful while considering the first story and a second believer agrees with this statement while considering the other story, they would not agree with each other, because they mean something different by the claim in each case. It is difficult to see how communication on religious matters would be possible if Braithwaite were correct, since the meaning of speakers would vary according to the stories they were entertaining.

Braithwaite's theory is therefore untenable. While the suggestion that expressivists should consider plans rather than other non-cognitive attitudes in their interpretation of religious language presents an interesting option, the framework in which this idea is developed has highly revisionary consequences.

5

Religious Internalism

We have reviewed some of the key points in the historical development of attitude theories. In this chapter I look at what I think is the most promising argument available in favour of either of the two principal kinds of attitude theory, expressivism and moderate attitude theory. This is the argument from the motivational force of religious belief. As we will see, it is related to an argument sketched by Berkeley on the motivational effects of faith that we considered in Chapter 3.

The motivation argument is based on two theories: an *internalist* theory of the motivational qualities of religious beliefs and Humean, or *belief-desire*, theory of action. These two theories, which independently have some plausibility, can be combined to generate an argument for attitude theory that parallels one of the leading arguments for ethical expressivism. I begin by assessing religious internalism as a theory in its own right, which in turn leads to the question of the relationship of religious belief and faith, then set out and assess the argument for attitude theory. While I do not think this argument is ultimately successful in making a case for expressivism, I do think that it provides support for a moderate attitude theory: religious sentences conventionally express non-cognitive conative as well as cognitive states.

Internalism

Internalism is the theory that beliefs of a certain type are necessarily related (in ways specified shortly) to the motivations of the person making that judgement. For example, ethical internalism holds that a person's belief that he or she ought to *x* or ought not to *x* is necessarily related to motivations to do or not do *x*. In contrast, ethical externalism is the theory that ethical beliefs are not essentially motivating: any connection between

ethical belief and motivation is contingent (Brink, 1989; Railton, 1986). Internalist theories are popular in contemporary metaethics (Korsgaard, 1986; Blackburn, 1984, p. 188; Gibbard, 1990; Smith, 1994, p. 7). We generally take it that if some people believe that eating meat is morally wrong, then they will refuse to eat meat should the option be presented to them. Similarly, if Catherine changes her views on meat eating, from thinking it morally harmless to believing it to be morally objectionable, we expect a corresponding change in her culinary habits. Moreover, if someone affirms that eating meat is wrong but subsequently fails to act accordingly, we regard that as grounds for doubting the sincerity of the assertion. Of course, there could be circumstances that explain the failure to act appropriately. For example, if Catherine were faced with a choice whereby not eating meat would bring about a result that seemed even more morally undesirable than eating meat, such as death from starvation, we would not take that as evidence that she did not believe in the moral rightness of vegetarianism. In the absence of such circumstances, however, we take it that people are motivated to act in accordance with their moral judgements. The internalist has a clear explanation for the apparent connection between agents moral beliefs and their motivations.

A comparable theory of religious internalism is the view on the following lines (it is refined in the following discussion): religious belief (belief in God, beliefs about salvation, beliefs about what God commands, and so on) is necessarily accompanied with the believer's motivations to act positively towards or in accordance with the object of religious belief. Religious externalism is the theory that religious beliefs are not necessarily related to the motivations of believers. Although many philosophers of religion and theologians have touched on ideas closely related to religious internalism or made claims that are highly pertinent to it, it has rarely been explored as a distinct theory. However, before we review this literature and assess the theory, we need a more precise statement of the necessary relation proposed by internalists. Since its formulation has evolved over many years of debate with externalist critics, it is useful to consider the development of moral internalism.

Here is a formulation of a simple version of moral internalism:

Simple moral internalism. It is necessary that if a person *P* believes that *x* ought to be done, then *P* is motivated to *x*; if *P* believes that *x* is morally wrong, then *P* is motivated not to *x*.

Simple moral internalism is widely viewed as too strong. For example, a number of psychological conditions, including apathy, depression,

emotional disturbance, and irrationality, could lead to a person not being motivated by moral beliefs. We can imagine a politician who in his youth cared about the suffering of people in different parts of the world and was devoted to making their lives better but who now cares only about the welfare of his close family and friends (Stocker 1979, p. 741). It seems that this politician could still hold to the moral opinions he held in his youth but due to a sense of futility is no longer motivated to act on them. Problems of this sort have led many internalists to prefer a conditional form of the theory:

Conditional moral internalism. It is necessary that if a person *P* believes that *x* ought to be done, then *P* is motivated to *x*, unless *P* is in condition *C*,

where condition *C* includes the range of psychologically abnormal conditions and irrationality.¹

Conditional moral internalism also seems too strong. Here are two types of problem case. First, condition *C* does not seem broad enough. It seems possible that there could be an 'amoralist' who is psychologically balanced and rational and who has moral beliefs about what he ought and ought not do but is utterly indifferent about them. We can also imagine a moral rebel, such as Satan as depicted in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, who makes moral judgements about what is right and wrong but is attracted to evil. Conditional moral internalism proposes a necessary connection between moral belief and motivation under certain circumstances, but amoralism and moral rebellion both seem possible and are not ruled out by the suggested circumstances *C*. Second, there appear to be numerous moral judgements that are not clearly linked to any specific motivational profile. For example, the beliefs that companionship is good, that the 2003 invasion of Iraq was wrong, and that derivative traders ought not to have rigged the interbank lending rate are moral beliefs that do not require any specific follow-up action. Some moral beliefs may involve changes in the agent's feelings towards things or tendencies towards certain options but do not commit the believer to any decisive action. The complexity of the relationship between moral beliefs and the changes in an agent's motivations and dispositions is not captured by conditional internalism. Blackburn emphasises this complexity in the following:

An ethic may characteristically express itself in disdain of those who do not measure up, rather than anger at them, or in colourless

administrative controls on conduct, rather than emotional public demonstrations. But this difficulty of definition arises not because the subject is mysterious, or especially 'sui generis', or resistant to understanding in any terms that enable us to understand the rest of our emotional and motivational natures. It arises because of the polymorphous nature of our emotional and motivational natures themselves. (1998, p. 14)

A given type of moral belief, therefore, need not issue in a *distinctive* pattern of changes in the believer's overt behaviour. Two people with the same moral belief may behave differently. However, if some form of internalism is to be successful, moral belief must normally be accompanied by the believer having a certain motivational nature – that is, a nature that may give rise to a range of feelings, emotions, dispositions, and/or (in the right circumstances) behaviour favourably or unfavourably towards what is regarded as good.

In response to these objections to conditional moral internalism, a number of internalists have defended revisions to the theory that takes the necessity relation to be between moral beliefs and motivational natures that either *normally* hold for individuals or normally hold at the level of the community of which the believer is a member (Blackburn 1998; Dreier, 1990; Horgan & Timmons, 1992; Lenman, 1999).

Modest internalism. It is necessary that if a person *P* has a moral belief that *x* is good, then either *P* has a motivational nature disposed favourably towards *x* or *P* is part of a community where moral belief *x* is normally accompanied by believers having motivational natures disposed favourably towards *x*.

Both amoralism and moral rebellion are compatible with modest internalism. It is possible, consistently with modest internalism, for an amoral individual to acquire moral beliefs but not undergo the changes in motivational nature that normally occur in agents in the broader community. Moral rebellion can occur as an exceptional change either in an agent with an otherwise normal motivational profile or in an individual in the context of a community in which moral beliefs produce normal changes in its members' motivational profiles. Satan, for example, is a fallen angel who was at one time motivated to do what he judged to be good (and perhaps could be regarded by the internalist as part of a community of angels where being appropriately motivated by moral beliefs is the norm).

Since comparable arguments could be raised against a simple version of religious internalism as those raised against moral internalism, it

seems sensible to begin an assessment of religious internalism by taking modest internalism as the starting point. Is it reasonable to take the position that, as a matter of necessity, religious belief in God normally goes along with a motivational nature that favourably inclines the believer towards God or that such belief occurs in a community where it is normally accompanied by the believer having a motivational nature that is favourable to God? To some extent, the same case can be made for religious internalism as for moral internalism because many religious beliefs appear to impose obligations on the believer. For example, beliefs about what God commands or expects of human beings, beliefs about what should be done in order to achieve salvation, beliefs about what we owe God as our creator, and beliefs about how we fit into divine plans all involve normative beliefs about what we religiously and morally ought to do. If moral internalism is correct, therefore, then so is religious internalism for a large class of cases. There are, of course, many religious sentences that are not clearly normative or evaluative but have a more theoretical character, for example, 'God exists' and 'God is omnipotent' and other sentences describing God's nature. As noted above, modest internalism does not posit a specific decision policy in connection with a given religious belief. However, the internalist can point out that the adoption of new religious belief normally goes along with a variety of changes in the behaviour, dispositions, and attitudes of the believer. The substantial changes in a person's attitudes and life usually following from a religious conversion are the most easily observable examples of the changes in an agent's motivational nature that accompany religious belief.

Construed in this modest way, religious internalism is not put in any difficulty by the obvious cases that might be supplied by externalist counterexamples of religious belief with no associated motivation. For example, it seems possible that Christians who fully engage in a religious life – going to church, praying, being an active member of the religious community – could subsequently become unmotivated and disengaged without thereby losing their religious beliefs. However, this is compatible with religious internalism, because the believers were at one time motivated in the normal way. Also the believers are part of a larger religious community where religious belief is normally related to motivational natures. Another potential problem for internalism, one that emerges from discussions of the nature of faith, is the religious beliefs of demons: they believe that there is a God but are not suitably motivated to act on that belief. Demons are not taken to be entirely unmotivated – 'the demons believe and they shudder' (James 2:19) – but

they are motivated in the wrong sorts of way; that is, they fear and despise God. This example is similar to the problem of moral rebellion raised against moral internalism where Satan's ethical beliefs are accompanied by a motivation to do what is wrong. Milton's Satan also believes that there is a God and is motivated to defy God and thwart God's plans. However, rebellion against God provides no more compelling a case against modest religious internalism than moral rebellion does against modest moral internalism. Demons are not examples of agents with normal moral motivations. Moreover, in the case of Satan (and perhaps other demons) there was a time at which he was more appropriately motivated to act in accordance with God's will. These cases do not, therefore, upset the modest variety of religious internalism.

How does this discussion of moral and religious psychology connect with theories of religious language? Since the sincere assertions of indicative religious sentences conventionally express religious beliefs,² the internalist theory also has implications for the interpretation of religious sentences: they are conventionally used to express mental states that have a necessary connection with the motivational nature of the speaker. Internalism, therefore, marks an important characteristic not just of the psychology of religious belief but also in the content of religious assertions.

There is also linguistic evidence about religious assertions that lends support to internalism.³ Suppose a religious believer reads about Bernie Madoff and concludes:

1. The best way he could secure his salvation would be to sincerely repent his sins. But he has no intention of doing that.

And suppose that Bernie Madoff were to say about himself:

2. The best way I could secure my salvation would be to sincerely repent my sins. But I have no intention of doing that.

Now if the religious externalist is right, then (1) and (2) have similar propositional contents and are expressing similar beliefs about Madoff. But (2), the judgement hypothetically made by Madoff, looks odd in a way that (1) does not. While (1) looks like a coherent religious judgement about Madoff, (2) makes Madoff look practically irrational. He seems to have failed to be motivated to act in accordance with what he recognises to be his own best interests. Why is there an asymmetry in the two cases if they have similar propositional content?

The internalist has an explanation. The speaker of (1) is affirming a view about what should be done in Madoff's situation that is entirely compatible with denying that Madoff is motivated in the relevant way to act on what he should do. Whereas in (2), if religious internalism is correct, Madoff is expressing a religious belief about what he should do to be saved – which is (necessarily) normally accompanied by the believer having a certain motivational nature favourably disposed towards achieving that end – and then denying that he is motivated to act accordingly. The internal link between having a religious belief and the believer's motivational nature accounts for the oddness of asserting (2).

Compare this with a non-religious (and non-ethical) case. Suppose a guest at a drinks party sees somebody spill red wine on the carpet. The guest believes that the best way of clearing the red wine mark is to pour white wine on the stain. It turns out that the host also believes this to be true but does not wish to act on the advice. So the guest concludes:

3. The best way to clear a red wine carpet stain is to pour white wine on it. But the host has no intention of doing that.

While the host concludes:

4. The best way I could clear that carpet stain is by pouring white wine on it. But I have no intention of doing that.

Sentences (3) and (4) express similar propositions, but like (1) and (2), there is no asymmetry between them. It is entirely sensible for the host to conclude (4) without any desire to act on that belief. Suppose, for example, that the host does not like the carpet and has already arranged for a replacement to be fitted. The host might then have no desire to do anything to remove the stain. Or suppose that the host does not like the guest who spilt the wine and wants to make the damage look more serious than it is. There are various motivations that the host might have that would make (4) a rational thing to say or think.

Internalists can also explain why we find an asymmetry in the religious judgements (1) and (2) (and a similar case could be made for moral judgements) that we do not find in other comparable non-religious judgements. The fact that religious beliefs are necessarily related to the motivational natures of believers, whereas beliefs about carpet stains are not, accounts for why (4) appears a reasonable thing to say but (2) does not. It is the psychologically conflicted nature of the speaker's expressed mental states that explains the oddness of (2) in comparison with (4).

A plausible case can, therefore, be made for modest religious internalism, and the theory can be formulated in a way that explains the intimate connection between religious belief and motivation while also addressing externalist counterexamples.

Internalism and faith

Despite the interest of religious internalism as an account of the psychology of religious belief as well as its potential importance for interpreting religious language, the topic is rarely addressed directly. This makes it difficult to say with certainty whether allegiances in the philosophy of religion lie mainly with religious internalism or externalism. However, it is useful to put the discussion of religious internalism in the context of other closely related work on the relationship between religious belief and motivation in the philosophy of religion. In most cases, as we will see, what is said is either supportive or at least compatible with religious internalism.

Two outliers in the literature are Kant and Wittgenstein. Kant, in at least some of his writings on religion and particularly in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, presents religious belief as a purely action-guiding phenomena.

We declare, for instance, that the things of the world must be viewed as if they received their existence from a highest intelligence. The idea [of God] is thus really only a heuristic, not an ostensive concept. It does not show us how an object is constituted, but how, under its guidance, we should seek to determine the constitution and connection of the objects of experience. (A 671, B 699)

[T]he idea of [God], like all speculative ideas, seeks only to formulate the command of reason, that all connection in the world be viewed in accordance with the principle of a systematic unity – as if all such connection had its source in one single all-embracing being, as the supreme and all-sufficient cause. (A 686, B 714)

The idea of a supreme intelligent being, Kant proposes, should not be understood as representing a religious fact but provides guidance for how to think about the world that has the potential to be scientifically productive. For example, the idea that there is a supreme creator might lead one to think that the world is governed by simple underlying natural laws and motivate the search for them. Two different ways of developing Kant's comments into a theory of religious belief in God

are as follows. (a) Religious beliefs are non-representational, and their content is exhausted by their regulative role in the thoughts and behaviour of believers. (b) Religious belief is representational, but religious believers do not really believe in what they say but instead use religious ideas as a guide to how to think and behave. Option (a) is a radical form of attitude theory that looks as if it will encounter the same problems that led us to reject non-cognitivism in the introduction. Option (b) is a variety of fictionalism, a theory that we consider in detail in Part III: contrary to appearances, religious believers are not really asserting the truth of what they say but should be thought of as acting *as if* there were a supreme creator or pretending that there is such a being or engaging in religious discourse and practice in a similar way to our engagement with fiction. On either of these interpretations, the contribution of religious belief to a person's mental states lies mainly in its regulative role.

A comparable regulative theory of religious belief is suggested in Wittgenstein's lectures, where religious belief is characterised as using a 'picture'.⁴

Suppose somebody made this guidance for this life: believing in the Last Judgement. Whenever he does anything, this is before his mind. In a way, how are we to know whether to say he believes this will happen or not? ... It will show, not by reasoning or by appeal to ordinary grounds for belief, but rather by regulating for in all his life. This is a very much stronger fact – foregoing, pleasures, always appealing to this picture. (1966, pp. 53–4)

It is not entirely clear what Wittgenstein means by 'picture'; it seems to be a mental image to which the believer refers when making moral or other decisions that might have an impact on his status at the last judgement. Wittgenstein suggests that the regulative role of the picture is essential to religious belief. The believer having grounds for thinking that the picture is true is treated as non-essential.

The regulative account of religious belief suggested by Wittgenstein and Kant (in some of their work) is strongly internalist. Having a religious belief is to be practically guided by religious ideas in one's thinking and action. However, few internalists are likely to endorse this position because it runs into the same counterexamples as the simple version of internalism. For instance, it seems that an agent could have a religious belief in the Last Judgement, but due to depression it is not associated with any change in his actions or attitudes. The regulative theory will give the counter-intuitive conclusion that this is impossible and that the

agent in question does not have a religious belief. Equally challenging are the problems of irrationality, disinterest, and rebellion.

A much more widely held view treats religious belief at face value as having representational content but contrasts 'mere' belief with the motivational nature of faith. Take, for example, the following comments from Plantinga on faith:

The person with faith, however, not only believes the central claims of the Christian faith; she also (paradigmatically) finds the whole scheme of salvation enormously attractive, delightful, moving, a source of amazed wonderment. She is deeply grateful to the Lord for his great goodness and responds to his sacrificial love with love of her own....Not primarily in the executive function of the will (the function of making decisions, of seeking and avoiding various states of affairs), though of course that is also involved, but in its affective function, its function of loving and hating, finding attractive or repellent, approving or disapproving. And the believer, the person with faith, has the right beliefs, but also the right affections. Conversion and regeneration alters affection as well as belief. (Plantinga, 2000, p. 292)

Plantinga's position on faith as affective and motivational appears sympathetic to religious internalism. Moreover, his recognition that faith has more complicated motivational effects than shown in the 'executive function of the will' is in line with the proposed modifications to internalism that led to the modest formulation of the theory. However, Plantinga does not give an explicit endorsement of the view. Our interest is in internalism as a theory about religious belief, not just faith. If Plantinga thinks that religious believers or communities of religious believers under normal circumstances could form beliefs without having associated motivational natures, then he would be an internalist about faith but an externalist about religious belief. The answer to whether Plantinga is an internalist about religious belief as well as faith will depend on the conditions under which an agent may have a religious belief *without* faith or without an associated motivational nature.

Plantinga does allow that belief can come apart from faith or from motivation natures. The key issue, however, is whether the conditions under which this can happen are ones that modest religious internalism allows as exceptions to the necessary normal relations between religious beliefs and the believer's motivational nature: various psychological conditions, religious rebellion, unmotivated individuals in a community

where being motivated is the norm, and so on. Plantinga does not give a full answer to this question, but the examples of belief without faith that he gives are consistent with religious internalism. For example, he comments: 'The difference between believer and devil, therefore, lies in the area of affections: of love and hate, attraction and repulsion, desire and detestation. In traditional categories, the difference lies in the orientation of the will' (2002, p. 292). The religious beliefs of devils, along with other cases of religious rebellion, are examples that are consistent with modest internalism. In the examples of belief-without-faith that Plantinga gives, therefore, his account appears compatible with modest internalism about religious belief.

Other accounts of faith and belief look similarly compatible with modest internalism. Notably Aquinas, who offers in his *Summa Theologica* perhaps the most intellectualised version of faith as a kind of firm religious belief, talks of a 'living' faith that he contrasts with the faith of devils. Faith, Aquinas says, is a gift of grace that is 'perfected and formed by charity' (1999, p. 90; II.II.4.3) and gives humans 'a certain affection for the good' even when faith is 'lifeless' (1999, p. 103; II.II.5.2).

One philosopher whose sympathies seem to be with externalism is Richard Swinburne. He writes:

a man may believe that there is a God, and yet fail to worship God or render thanks to him – through a failure to have the purpose to worship whatever God there may be, or through a failure to have any purpose to express gratitude to any one who has benefited him. Or a man may believe that there is a God, who gives to (and only to) the virtuous a life of happiness after death, and yet fail to be virtuous through a failure to have the purpose of securing his long-term well-being. (1981, p. 28)

These points may appear unequivocally externalist. However, Swinburne goes on to recognise a connection between religious belief and being disposed to act: 'In these cases we describe a man as not "acting on" his beliefs, because we naturally expect him to have, or think that he ought to have, the purposes in question'. (1981, p. 28) Swinburne distinguishes a person's beliefs from his 'purposes' and requires that both belief and purpose be in place for a religious believer to be suitably motivated. Religious belief by itself does not motivate. However, even with Swinburne, his position is not a clear rejection of modest internalism because he does not specify the circumstances under which an agent may have religious beliefs while lacking the relevant purposes. If agents have

beliefs without purposes only under those abnormal circumstances that the modest internalist allows for, then the possession of beliefs without corresponding purposes is not inconsistent with religious internalism. Merely recognising the possibility of religious belief coming apart from a motivational nature is not enough to clearly side with either externalism or internalism.

In general, therefore, there is tacit if not explicit support for modest religious internalism among many philosophers and theologians. There are few clearly opposed to the position.

Humean theories of motivation and attitude theories

The second part of the case for attitude theory is the Humean, or belief-desire, theory of action. This is based on a distinction between two types of representational mental state: beliefs and desires (or other desire-like states such as hopes, wishes, stances, intentions, and so on, generally called *pro-attitudes*).⁵ Desires are mental states that represent the way we would like the world to be and are intrinsically motivational. Beliefs are mental states that represent the world as being a certain way and accordingly may be true or false or more or less informative, but they are not motivationally efficacious states; they are, as Berkeley put it, 'inert'. Beliefs and desires are thereby understood as 'distinct existences' in that one can exist without the other. For a belief to cause an agent to act, therefore, it must be accompanied by a desire or pro-attitude. An action, according to the Humean theory, is the result of a combination of beliefs and pro-attitudes. In many cases, the pro-attitude represents the goal that the agent wants to achieve, and the belief supplies the information that the agent uses to achieve it. For example, my beliefs about the whereabouts of bread and a toaster combined with my desire for a slice of toast result in my making some toast.⁶

The Humean theory of action is a widely held view and the dominant current theory of motivation in analytic philosophy both among those who accept and those who reject attitude theories. In putting forward this theory, I am therefore following a very well-trodden path. However, one notable point of disagreement with the theory is whether agents can possess belief states without accompanying desire states that are nevertheless motivationally efficacious; these are sometimes called 'besires' (McDowell, 1979; Shafer-Landau, 2003). One of the most effective Humean arguments against the existence of besires has been developed by Michael Smith (1994). Beliefs and desires, Smith argues, have a different 'direction of fit'. Beliefs have a 'mind-to-world' direction of fit

in that our beliefs aim to represent the world; evidence that a belief does not accurately represent the world counts against holding that belief. In contrast, our desires represent states that we want to bring about and evidence that a desire misrepresents the world does not count against the desire. To the contrary, we desire things that we do not believe have already been achieved. As such, desires have a world-to-mind direction of fit: we want to bring the world into accord with what we desire. When beliefs and desires are understood in this way, we can see, Smith argues, why there cannot be mental states that both represent the way the world is and also motivate us. For this would be a mental state with incompatible directions of fit. It would at once aim to represent the way the world is and motivate one to change the world to be in accordance with what it represents.⁷

Suppose that we grant that both modest religious internalism and the Humean theory of motivation as two plausible theories. We are now in a position to see how these can be used to lend support to attitude theory. Call the mental states conventionally expressed by sincere religious utterances religious *commitments*. What kind of mental state is a religious commitment? Consider the following argument:

- i. Necessarily, religious commitments are normally accompanied (in the way described above) by agents having certain motivational natures. (This is modest religious internalism.)
- ii. Taken by themselves, beliefs neither motivate nor are capable of generating motivationally efficacious states; motivation is the product of belief and desire. (This is Humean psychology.)
- iii. If religious commitments are just beliefs, that would not account for their necessary normal connection with motivational natures because these beliefs could co-exist with a variety of pro-attitudes that would not yield the right sort of motivational change. (Beliefs and desires are 'distinct existences'.)
- iv. If religious commitments are pro-attitudes, then they could supplement the religious believer's existing beliefs to modify the believer's motivational nature in the right way.
- v. Therefore, religious commitments are pro-attitudes.

According to this argument, which follows a similar form to a standard argument for ethical expressivism (see Blackburn, 1984), what we have been calling 'religious beliefs' are in fact pro-attitudes. If religious utterances express pro-attitudes, then expressivism is true. However, the argument could equally be presented as an argument for moderate attitude

theory by replacing 'pro-attitudes' in (iv) and (v) with 'pro-attitudes and beliefs'.

Which attitude theory?

We can quickly see, however, that the argument for attitude theory from modest internalism and Humean psychology does not make a good case for religious expressivism. Expressivism is the theory that religious sentences do not represent religious facts and do not conventionally express religious beliefs (though they may, depending on what is said, express non-religious beliefs); instead they express non-cognitive attitudes. However, expressivism has already effectively been ruled out as the plausible upshot of internalism because of the watering down of the internalist thesis from simple internalism to modest internalism as a result of the externalist counterexamples. Although modest internalism makes it a necessary requirement that religious commitments are normally accompanied with suitable motivational natures at either individual or community level, it also allows for a sizeable range of abnormal – but presumably not uncommon – cases (irrationality, depression, apathy, rebellion, and so on) where an agent has religious commitments without having an associated motivational nature of the right kind. If such cases are possible, even frequent, then it seems that the sincere assertion of a religious commitment should not be thought of as just the expression of a pro-attitude: the motivational nature of an agent can come apart from religious commitment. Since pro-attitudes are intrinsically motivating states, in these cases religious speakers appear to have religious beliefs but lack appropriate motivational natures. If agents can and often do have religious beliefs, consistently with modest internalism, then modest internalism provides no reason to suppose that religious sentences are not used to express religious beliefs.⁸

It is different, however, for moderate attitude theory. Because the theory proposes that religious language is used to express *both* beliefs and attitudes, it neatly explains modest moral internalism. However, it is not put into difficulty by the cases allowed for by modest internalism of agents with religious commitments but without a normal motivational profile. When such agents make religious assertions, according to moderate attitude theory, they still express both religious beliefs and pro-attitudes even though they are not accurately representing their own feelings. Asserting 'God is good' without having any pro-attitude towards God (or a suitable motivational profile that might generate such a favourable attitude) is the flip side of asserting 'God is good' without

believing that God is good. Whereas in the latter, if done intentionally, is deceitful, the former is paying lip service to a religious view when one's heart is not in it.

There remains, however, an outstanding concern about moderate attitude theory if modest internalism is true. Why is it *necessarily* the case that there should normally be a relationship between having religious commitments and being suitably motivated? If the moderate attitude theorist takes religious sentences to conventionally express both beliefs and pro-attitudes and if religious commitments can be understood as normally consisting in both beliefs and attitudes, what explains the fact that the relationship between beliefs and pro-attitudes holds as a matter of necessity? Since beliefs and pro-attitudes are 'distinct existences', it is puzzling that this should be true. However improbable in practice, it should be possible that religious beliefs and motivational natures *normally* come apart. (In contrast, the expressivist has a very neat explanation for why there is a necessary relationship between religious commitments and motivational natures: it's because religious commitments *are* pro-attitudes. However, as we have seen, this makes the relationship too close, as modest internalists agree.)

To answer this problem, the moderate attitude theorist needs to take a view on what kind of necessity is being proposed by modest internalism. We can distinguish between two relevant kinds of necessity (Tresan, 2006). What are called wide-scope, or *de dicto*, necessities range over an entire proposition; narrow-scope, or *de re*, necessities range over the properties of a given object. Here is an example. Sentence (5) is a wide-scope necessity that tells us that the proposition 'bachelors are unmarried men' is necessary.

5. Necessarily, bachelors are unmarried men.

In contrast, (6) is a narrow-scope necessity that tells us that something (bachelors) necessarily has a certain property (being unmarried men).

6. Bachelors are necessarily unmarried men.

The difference between the two types of necessity is conventionally indicated by the placing of the modal operator 'necessarily'. There is also a clear difference between the meaning of (5) and (6). The former wide-scope modal claim is true: it is impossible that there should be any unmarried bachelor. The latter narrow-scope modal claim is false and unduly unfair to bachelors: it is not necessary that any given bachelor

has to be unmarried. A bachelor isn't single as a matter of necessity. To take another example, (7) states a wide-scope necessity and (8) a narrow-scope necessity.

7. Necessarily, if x is a planet, it orbits a star.
8. If x is a planet, it necessarily orbits a star.

They also mean quite different things. (7) states that it must be the case that if something is a planet, then it orbits a star, a statement that, on a common account of what planets are, is correct. In contrast, (8) tells us something about those objects that are planets: they necessarily have the property of orbiting the star. But this appears false because it seems possible that Jupiter, for instance, might not have orbited a star or could break off its orbital path.

It is not immediately clear whether the kind of necessity proposed by internalists is *de re* or *de dicto*. Internalism admits a wide-scope and narrow-scope reading.

de dicto internalism. Necessarily, religious commitments are normally accompanied by suitable motivational natures.

de re internalism. Religious commitments are necessarily normally accompanied by suitable motivational natures.

These two readings are significantly different. If internalism posits a *de re* necessity, then internalism tells us something about the nature of religious commitments: they are mental states that are tied to our motivational natures. This seems to have implications for our account of religious psychology, and it is the *de re* reading of internalist necessity that expressivists use to argue that religious commitments are not beliefs but must be pro-attitudes. But if internalism posits a *de dicto* necessity, then what is necessary is a proposition about the relationship between religious commitments and motivational natures. In the latter case, there is nothing about the religious commitment itself that makes it necessarily accompanied by a suitable motivational nature. This difference is sometimes expressed by saying that *de re* necessities are about the necessary properties of objects, whereas *de dicto* necessities hold by virtue of our concepts. The wide-scope necessity of (5) tells us nothing about any particular bachelor that we do not already know by the fact that the person is a bachelor. The necessity holds by virtue of the concept 'bachelor'; that is, we count as bachelors only those men who are unmarried. Similarly, *de dicto* internalism can be understood

as following from the fact that we take religious commitments to be the kinds of thing that are normally related to motivational natures. But it does not follow that religious commitments must be intrinsically (normally) motivational; a belief and a desire could serve equally well as a religious commitment.

What is particularly significant about the *de dicto* reading of internalism is that it avoids controversial implications for religious psychology and instead shows something about the concept 'religious commitment' (or 'religious belief'). A nice comparable example is 'universally reviled belief' (Tresan, 2006, p. 146). Necessarily, a universally reviled belief is universally reviled. However, it is clearly not necessary of a universally reviled belief that it is universally reviled; if things had been different, it might have been treated differently. Clearly, we don't need a special psychological theory for universally reviled beliefs to explain the necessity of their being universally reviled. The necessity follows from our practice of classifying only beliefs that are universally reviled as universally reviled beliefs. Other examples include 'favourite belief', 'wishful belief', 'propaganda film' (Tresan, 2006, p. 146). In general, we can understand *de dicto* necessity as underpinned by our linguistic practices rather than essential properties of the things we are describing. The claim of *de dicto* internalism is that it is linguistic practice to take religious commitments and beliefs as normally related to motivational natures; we withhold the judgement that an agent has religious commitments (or say that they have them in some incomplete or ersatz way) where this is not the case.

Modest religious internalism can therefore do justice to the intuition that there is an intimate connection between religious belief and motivation, as well as addressing externalist counterexamples, by positing a *de dicto* necessary relation between religious belief and the normal possession of a motivational nature (by an individual or by members of a community). Moreover, moderate attitude theory provides a better explanation for internalism than face value theory. It does so, however, by retaining much of the face value approach. Religious sentences represent religious facts and are used to express religious beliefs according to moderate attitude theory, but they also express non-cognitive attitudes.

6

Against Expressivism

In Chapter 5 we looked at the motivation argument for attitude theory and found that a case could be made for moderate attitude theory but that there was no comparable argument for expressivism. In this chapter we assess the most promising lines of argument against attitude theory. Since expressivist versions of religious attitude theory are the ones that have received most critical attention in the philosophy of religion literature, I mainly focus on expressivism and then consider to what extent the objections are also effective against moderate attitude theory. While I argue that religious expressivism has answers for some of the objections raised against it, it encounters some very serious problems that render it an unacceptable theory; moderate attitude theory, in contrast, escapes relatively unscathed. In each section of this chapter I look at a different objection.

Expressivist analysis

It is useful to begin by noting an important difference between the account of religious language that religious expressivists need to provide and the comparable account of ethical language provided by ethical expressivists. For the most part, ethical language and discourse is characterised by a distinctive class of predicates that are used to describe actions and events. For example, the sentences ‘Stealing is wrong’, ‘Charity is a virtue’, ‘Your behaviour was monstrous’, and ‘That was the honourable thing to do’ are distinguished as ethical by their use of ethical predicates. The central role of ethical predicates in ethical language allows for a straightforward expressivist account: a moral sentence expresses an evaluation of the actions or events to which the ethical predicate is applied. Moreover, since ethical predicates typically bestow a positive or a negative evaluation on the action or event in question, the expressivist

accordingly proposes that the attitude the sentence is used to express is either approval or disapproval.¹

Religious expressivists can employ a similar strategy for religious predicates: a statement which uses a religious predicate with respect to some action or event expresses an attitude towards that event. So for sentences that describe, for example, an action *divinely ordained* or an object *holy* or an event *miraculous*, the expressivist has in place a method for interpreting them as the expression of non-cognitive attitudes towards the actions, objects, and events in question. (1), for instance, might be interpreted as (2),

1. The parting of the Red Sea by Moses was miraculous.
2. AWE! (the parting of the Red Sea by Moses).

where 'AWE!' stands for an expression of amazement (or whatever attitude the expressivist proposes is conventionally expressed by saying that something is miraculous). To this extent, religious expressivism and ethical expressivism employ similar methods of interpretation. However, religious language is not distinguished merely by a class of predicates; there are also descriptions of the nature and activity of God and other supernatural agents. For example, how is the religious expressivist to interpret (3) and (4)?

3. God said to Noah, 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh'.
4. God struck down some of the men of Beth Shemesh.

So it seems that there is a gap in the expressivist analysis when it comes to sentences that describe God or employ other religious noun phrases. Now, the expressivist could attempt to interpret language about God predicatively. For example, (4) might be read as:

5. Striking down some of the men of Beth Shemesh was an act of God.

Since 'act of God' functions as a predicate, (5) could be interpreted consistently with expressivism as

6. AWE! (striking down some of the men of Beth Shemesh).

However, this will still leave expressivists with the problem of how to interpret sentences that assign properties to God without a natural alternative interpretation.

7. God is great.
8. God is omniscient.

There doesn't seem to be any plausible reading of (7) or (8) that can construe the reference to God predicatively. There is, therefore, an outstanding question about whether expressivism has the resources to provide a complete interpretation of religious language or whether it must allow that some religious sentences represent religious facts or refer to God. Note, however, that this is not a problem for moderate attitude theory because the expression of non-cognitive states adds to rather than replaces the representation of and belief in religious facts.

Expressivism, atheism and truth

Expressivists appear to be proposing an account of religious language that is quite different to atheism. Whereas atheists typically adopt a face value account of religious language but think that religious sentences and beliefs are false, expressivists deny that religious sentences represent religious facts or are used to express religious beliefs but instead express non-cognitive states. If religious sentences do not represent religious facts, then they can't be wrong about those facts; if they are not used to express religious beliefs, then they are not used to express religious beliefs that are false. So expressivism looks to be distinct from atheism. However, there remains the ongoing complaint against expressivism that it depends on or collapses into atheism. We noted this objection in Chapter 1. It is raised by van Inwagen:

Not so long ago, as time is measured in the history of thought, anyone who said that it was a mistake to regard *x* as *F* would have meant, and have been taken by everyone to mean, that *x* was *not F*. (2006, p. 156)

There are two ways of developing this objection. One is to point out that if expressivism is right, then religious believers are wrong in thinking that they are referring to God and describing a religious reality. Believers can no longer say that it is a *fact* that there is a God or even that it is *true* that there is a God (Tilley, 1978, p. 37). In general, expressivism seems to have a problem in giving a plausible account of what religious believers mean when they claim that their beliefs are true or factual. Second, insofar as the believer is able to claim, consistently with the expressivist account, that *there is* a God or that God *has* various properties, and so

on, it looks like a kind of cheat. The believer is merely *saying* that there is a God, but it follows from expressivism that there are no religious facts being represented and the attitudes that the believer is expressing do not represent a religious reality. Expressivism makes it look as if religious believers are claiming things that are not really true (McCutcheon, 2001, p. 182).

These objections seem warranted when we look at the writings of some religious expressivists. Take, for example, a sample of comments by D. Z. Phillips on religious belief and language:

Religious belief is itself the expression of a moral vision. (1976, p. 143)

The praising and the glorifying does not refer to some object called God. Rather, the expression of such praise and glory is what we call the worship of God. (1976, p. 149)

Religious expressions of praise, glory, etc. are not referring expressions. These activities are expressive in character, and what they express is called the worship of God. (1976, p. 150)

Phillips's position is not just that religious belief should be understood as a non-cognitive attitude but that religious expressions are *not referring expressions*. If, however, 'God' and other religious terms are not referring expressions, then it seems that what religious believers say about God is therefore false.

It is interesting, however, to see that Wittgenstein – a primary influence on Phillips's account of religion – comments on the role of religious language in expressing feelings and stances but does not make any more general claim about religious expressions failing to refer or about religious sentences not being true or descriptive. For example, he says that religious belief is 'like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it's *belief*, it's really a way of living, or a way of assessing life' (1994, p. 62). He says of the doctrine of predestination that it is 'less a theory than a sigh, or a cry' (1994, p. 30), and he also allows that the doctrine may be called 'true', albeit 'it is not permissible for someone to assert it as a truth, unless he himself says it in torment' (1994, p. 30). Taking the statement 'It is God's will', Wittgenstein claims that we should not even consider it an assertion but rather a prescription. 'The work done by this sentence, or at any rate something like it, could also be done by a command!' (1994, p. 61).

Can the expressivist therefore defend *both* the central thesis that religious sentences do not represent religious facts and express non-cognitive

attitudes rather than religious beliefs while *also* giving a place for talk of religious truth, facts, and reference? In recent years, and in particular since Simon Blackburn's influential presentation of expressivism in *Spreading the Word* (1984), expressivists in different fields (notably ethics) have tried to provide interpretations of 'realist' sounding talk of truth, facts, reference, and so on, that is consistent with their central theory. The task of showing how a non-cognitive region of discourse can have the appearance of being representational is called *quasi realism*. The quasi-realist project targets the linguistic evidence that motivates a face value approach to a given area of language and shows how this evidence can be explained consistently with an expressivist theory. The position is nicely summarised by Gideon Rosen:

[The quasi-realist] strategy is to construct a position which embraces all of the pregnant rhetoric of realism without qualification or reservation or devious reinterpretation of the language, but which is nonetheless recognisably antirealist in spirit. This is the project of quasi-realism. Begin with expressivist antirealism, according to which the function of the discourse in the disputed area is to give voice to our feelings or sentiments and not to represent the real features of things. Then show how the theorist can 'earn the right' to the rhetoric of factuality and objectivity by interpreting its central claims, not as articulations of heady metaphysical doctrine, but rather as themselves the expressions of attitudes of various sorts. (Rosen, 1998, pp. 386–7)

The main methods employed by expressivists in developing the quasi-realist project apply in a straightforward way to religious expressivism.

For example, take the sentence

9. 'God exists' is true.

This is something that someone who believes in God will certainly want to agree with. However, on the account of religious expressivism suggested by Phillips, (9) will be false because 'God' is not a referring expression. However, a better option for the expressivist is to follow a standard quasi-realist strategy of adopting a *deflationary* account of truth. According to the deflationary account of truth, the disquotational schema (DS) tells us all that can in general be said about truth.

(DS) '*p*' is true if and only if *p*.

In (DS), *p* stands for a sentence. According to this deflationary view, which is sometimes expressed by saying that truth is not a 'robust' or 'substantial' property, truth is primarily a device of disquotation that allows us to move from the mention of the sentence *p* (on the left-hand side) to using *p* to talk about some subject matter (on the right-hand side), and vice versa. This theory can be used by the expressivist to show how the truth predicate may be introduced into non-cognitive discourse without undermining expressivism. Consider, for example, the sentence

10. God is good.

The sentence can be inserted into DS as follows:

11. 'God is good' is true if and only if God is good.

It follows that the religious believer who affirms (10) can also affirm

12. 'God is good' is true.

In other words, on the deflationary theory of truth, in affirming (12), the religious believer does not add any information to (10). Calling (12) *true* does not, for instance, change its representational content. On the expressivist theory, therefore, (10) and (12) express similar non-cognitive attitudes. If there is a difference between them, it is not in their content but in (12) being a more forceful expression of the non-cognitive attitudes expressed by (10).

The deflationary strategy can be extended to encompass other key expressions that appeared to be difficult to interpret consistently with expressivism. For example, it is merely a platitude to say that a statement that is true is a *fact* and that a statement that is true is *really* true. So it follows that if it is true that God is good, then it is *really* true that God is good, and that if it is true, then it is also a *fact* that God is good. Moreover, a deflationary reading can also be proposed for reference: a singular term refers if it occurs in a true sentence. So in affirming (12), a religious believer can also affirm

13. 'God' is a referring term.

Now, a supporter of the face value approach may argue here that these deflationary interpretations of truth, reference, fact, and so on, are unsatisfactory. However, that takes us to the issue of how best to analyse truth in religious language; this is a topic that we explore in detail in

Part II. For present purposes, a deflationary theory of truth offers a way for expressivists to interpret the use of the truth predicate in religious language, along with facts, reference, and description, in a way that is consistent with expressivism. That is, religious believers can legitimately talk about truth and falsity consistently with the theory that religious affirmations are expressions of non-cognitive attitudes. Whereas D. Z. Phillips effectively bails out of the task of interpreting religious language consistently with expressivism at the point truth, reference and description are introduced, the quasi-realist presses ahead with an expressivist reading of these expressions.²

Face value theorists may be inclined at this point to press the issue of whether the expressivist believes that there is really any fact of the matter as to whether there is a God. If expressivists who follow the quasi-realist line agree that there is a fact of the matter, then haven't they effectively undermined their own theory? It would seem to follow that religious sentences aim to report facts, which is the position that the expressivist appeared to set out denying. However, the expressivist who takes on the quasi-realist project intends to give an account of religious language that shows how we get from an expressivist starting point to an interpretation of those areas of religious language that *look* as if they aim to be fact stating and descriptive without supposing that they actually represent religious facts. This is what the expressivist attempts to do by suggesting that (12) expresses the same as (10) (albeit a bit more forcefully) and that (13) is just a gloss on (12). We do not, in introducing talk about truth, reference, and so on, need to suppose that additional cognitive content is introduced into what is being said. As Blackburn puts it, in moving from the proposition that *p* to the proposition that *p* is true to the proposition that it is a fact that *p*, we have the impression of ascending 'Ramsey's ladder', where each move seems to be on a higher level than its predecessor. But they each have the same content: 'Ramsey's ladder is horizontal' (1998a, pp. 78–9, 294–7).

The plausibility of quasi realism remains a live debate, particularly in metaethics. It can be seen, however, that religious expressivists do not have to concede defeat when it comes to interpreting talk of truth, facts, reference, and description in religion; further resources are available to provide an interpretation consistent with expressivism.

Expressivism, introspection and empirical evidence

An objection sometimes raised against expressivism is that if religious sentences are not conventionally used to express religious beliefs but

instead express non-cognitive attitudes, this fact should be obvious to speakers. Richard Swinburne, for example, contends that the only way for us to settle the truth of expressivism (he targets Braithwaite's version of expressivism in particular) would be 'a sociological and literary survey of what people who use credal sentences think that they are doing and have thought that they were doing over the past two thousand years' (1993, p. 90). Swinburne believes that the face value theory will clearly be favoured in such a survey. A related point is made by John O'Leary-Hawthorne and Daniel Howard-Snyder:

It is fitting to begin by asking what is actually going on when religious believers confess their faith. We thus begin with some descriptive anthropology. In connection with this, let us ask the following related question: (a) Do many contemporary theists believe that 'God exists' expresses a truth? (b) When affirming their faith in the words of the Nicene Creed, do Christian theists express a belief that it is true that there exists one God? ... Why do we ask these questions? Because post-Kantian radicalism seems to suggest a 'no' answer to some or all of them. (O'Leary-Hawthorne & Howard-Snyder, 1996, p. 250)

Given that most religious believers will agree, when asked about what they understand themselves to be communicating when making religious utterances, that they are expressing truths, doesn't it follow that expressivism is false?

An obvious point to make in response to the argument about belief is that expressivism is a theory about the meaning of religious sentences, not a theory about religious believers' views about the meaning of what they say. Moreover, it is open to question whether speakers' judgements about the mental states that they are expressing are sufficiently fine grained to individuate the concept of 'belief' that is at issue between the face value theory and expressivism. As we saw in the discussion of Berkeley, the mental states that are commonly described as 'beliefs' might include not only 'input' beliefs but also 'output' beliefs (which are non-cognitive attitudes). 'Belief' is often used in a way that is not sensitive to the philosophical distinction that is relevant in separating the face value from the expressivist account of religious language. So even if speakers described as 'beliefs' the mental states they were expressing in using religious language, that would not establish that they took their utterances to express input beliefs.

On the issue of whether religious believers take their religious affirmations to express truths, expressivists have the option of further extending

the quasi-realist strategy described above. Just as '*p*' and '*p* is true' and 'it is a fact that *p*' do not really ascend Ramsey's ladder but just mean the same as '*p*', the expressivist can argue that the same point can be applied to "'*p*' expresses a truth'. One could not usefully ask religious believers, for example, whether the claim 'God exists' means that it is *true* that God exists or that God *really* exists or that it is *a fact* that God exists in the hope of getting an insightful answer on the truth or falsity of expressivism. On this basis, we should not expect a poll of the opinions of religious believers about the meaning of what they say to elicit any information that the expressivist will be unable to explain. Talk of the belief-expressing and truth-expressing purpose of religious utterances can also be explained within the expressivist framework as further expressions of non-cognitive attitudes.

Expressivism is subjectivism

D. Z Phillips (who, I have suggested, can be understood as a religious expressivist himself) argues that Braithwaite's account of religious language reduces religious language to 'psychological aids to moral endeavour'. Phillips in turn rejects 'reductionist subjectivism' because it gives a false picture of the role that religious concepts play in the lives of religious believers. Religious concepts, Phillips contends, are essentially tied up with the behaviour and attitudes of the religious believer.

[Religious] language is not contingently related to the believer's conduct as a psychological aid to it. On the contrary, it is internally related to it in that it is in terms of this language that the believer's conduct is to be understood. (Phillips, 1974, p. 144)

According to Phillips, one can 'make sense' of religious belief only in the context of the behaviour and attitudes that make up religious life. Phillips takes this idea to be rooted in Wittgenstein's remarks on religious belief.

Phillips does not give a precise statement of what he takes subjectivism or reductionism to be. However, I take religious reductionism to be a theory that gives the truth conditions of the class of religious sentences in terms of a class of sentences with some other subject matter. I take religious subjectivism to be a special case of reductionism whereby the class of religious sentences is 'reduced' to (or their the truth conditions are given in terms of) sentences about human psychology. For example, if the truth condition of (14) were given by (15), that would be a reductive, subjectivist analysis.

14. God created the world.
15. I [the speaker] wonder at the existence of the world.

I leave comment on the plausibility of subjectivist and reductionist theories until Part II (as we see there, Wittgenstein was at one time sympathetic to religious subjectivism). However, it is clear that that expressivism is not subjectivism or any kind of reductionism. These latter theories attempt to give a truth conditional analysis of religious sentences that shows how they are really about a non-religious subject matter. Expressivism offers no such analysis. As we have seen, expressivists take (14) to mean (something like)

16. W! (the world).

where 'W!' stands for an attitude of, say, wonder. Unlike (15), (16) is not truth-apt. Religious subjectivism takes religious sentences to report the mental states of speakers; expressivist take religious sentences to be used conventionally to give voice to their non-cognitive mental states.

Before leaving this topic it is useful to consider, purely as a point of comparison, a contrast between subjectivist and expressivist theories suggested by Wittgenstein in his discussion of sensation in *Philosophical Investigations*. Part of Wittgenstein's aim seems to be to question a standard and intuitively very plausible interpretation of talk about one's sensations as referring to inner states. That is, sensation language is used to describe our mental states. For example, the sensation claim (17) is true just in case the speaker has a pain in the shoulder.

17. I have a pain in my shoulder.

In general, a sensation statement can be understood as a report that represents the sensation states of the speaker. Wittgenstein presents numerous arguments against the subjectivist model of sensation reports, most famously the private language argument, but I do not explore these here. However, I do want to look at his alternative account of sensation language. Wittgenstein's position seems to be that rather than taking (17) as representing an internal mental state, we should see it as a linguistic expression of pain-behaviour. That is, the statement functions to give voice to one's pain rather than to report it.

Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach

him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour.

‘So you are saying that the word “pain” really means crying?’ – On the contrary: the verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it. (1953, p. 244)

As I understand Wittgenstein, he is not denying the existence of sensations, nor equating sensations with behaviour, but offering an account of the meaning of sensation statements. For example, this account might interpret (17) as

18. OUCH! (my shoulder).

where ‘OUCH!’ expresses pain towards the area specified in the brackets. The utterance ‘I am in pain’ would, on this approach, just be a less ‘primitive’ expression of ‘OUCH!’ While the superficial form of a sensation claim is representational, it really serves to give voice to one’s sensations. Wittgenstein, on the interpretation I have given here, is offering an expressivist account of sensation language.

Religious expressivism and logic

A central problem for religious expressivists is to explain how the meaning of a sentence appears to remain the same in asserted and unasserted contexts. This problem, originally introduced as the Frege-Geach problem (Geach, 1965), is widely seen as the principal stumbling block for ethical expressivism (Schroeder, 2008). A simple form of this difficulty for religious expressivism concerns the use of negation in religious discourse. Religious sentences can be negated and are consistent or inconsistent with each other. Suppose that a believer claims

19. There will be a Last Judgement.

On the expressivist theory, this claim should be understood as the expression of non-cognitive attitudes. Now, it is not entirely clear what the expressivist will say about the opposing claim:

20. There will not be a Last Judgement.

Presumably (20) must express mental states that are incompatible with those expressed by (19) if (19) and (20) are inconsistent. But now a problem becomes apparent; for how could the latter set of attitudes be

incompatible with the former? They cannot *contradict*, because a contradiction requires the assertion of a truth-apt claim along with its negation; non-cognitive attitudes cannot contradict one another. If we believe *p* and believe *not-p*, we know that one of the beliefs must be false because the world cannot conform to the truth of both beliefs. But if I desire *q* and desire *not-q*, I have conflicting attitudes and may lack clear direction on how to live, but I have not committed a logical mistake. Similarly, having the non-cognitive attitudes expressed by (19) as well as the non-cognitive attitudes expressed by (20) will not be inconsistent. The expressivist must therefore find a different account of negation in religious language.

Negation is just one in a range of related difficulties that the expressivist has with religious sentences embedded in sentences in which they are not asserted. Consider the following examples:

21. If Jesus is risen, then there will be a Last Judgement
22. Is it true that there will be a Last Judgement?

(21) is a conditional, and in uttering it, the speaker neither asserts that Jesus is risen nor that there will be a Last Judgement. It would be consistent for the speaker to sincerely claim that *if* Jesus is risen, *then* there will be a Last Judgement without agreeing either that Jesus is risen or that there will be a Last Judgement. Similarly with (22), to ask whether there will be a Last Judgement is not to assert that there will be one; the fact that such a question is asked may indicate that the speaker is not in a position to assert it. What, therefore, do these sentences mean on the expressivist theory? There do not seem to be any relevant non-cognitive attitudes that are being expressed.

One way to avoid the difficulty is to restrict the expressivist theory to religious assertions. But clearly such a theory would be seriously incomplete. It would have no account to offer concerning religious questions or religious conditionals. Moreover, unless the expressivist is able to give an explanation of religious claims that guarantees that a religious sentence means the same when it is asserted and when it is embedded, the theory will be unable to account for the validity of religious arguments. Take a simple *modus ponens* constructed within religious discourse, with the first premise

23. God is merciful.

Presumably the expressivist takes (23) to express a non-cognitive attitude. But take the second premise:

24. If God is merciful, then everyone will be saved.

From (23) and (24) it follows that

25. Everyone will be saved.

The conclusion (25) will presumably also be interpreted by the expressivist as the expression of a non-cognitive attitude. But how should the expressivist interpret the conditional (24)?

Religious expressivists face a dilemma. Suppose that (23) and (25) mean something different when they are embedded in (24). It follows that the argument is invalid because it involves a fallacy of equivocation. However, the argument seems evidently valid. Alternatively, suppose that the expressivist preserves the validity of the argument and agrees that (23) and (25) *do* mean the same when they are embedded in (24). Since (24) does not express the attitudes expressed by either (23) or (25), it follows that the meaning of (23) and (25) is not determined by the attitudes they are used to express and thus that expressivism is false. The expressivist clearly cannot take the second option, but the first option undermines the profusion of logically well-formed arguments found in religious discourse. Religious arguments ranging from the ontological argument, arguments about God's properties, the reasons for pluralism rather than exclusivism, inferences drawn from biblical considerations, countless theological arguments, and so on, will all be invalid on the expressivist's proposal.

It is useful to note at this point why it is that embedded religious sentences do not present any difficulty for the face value theory (or for moderate attitude theory). According to this theory, religious sentences aim to represent religious facts, and the predicates in a religious sentence to denote properties. (23), for example, has the content *God is merciful*. It does not matter, therefore, whether this sentence is freestanding or embedded because it represents the same religious fact in either context. In contrast, the expressivist takes the meanings of religious claims to be determined by the attitudes that they express. There is, therefore, no common component of meaning between freestanding and embedded occurrences of religious claims that the expressivist can appeal to show that they mean the same in either context.³

Expressivism and explanation

Another major obstacle for expressivism is that the description of religious facts can feature in the explanation of non-religious facts, notably

scientific and historical facts. God's action in the world can be used to explain why certain events occur, and God's creation of the world can be used as part of the explanation of anything that has occurred or that will occur; his existence and agency may be posited as an explanation for, say, the laws of nature. If religious sentences express attitudes and do not represent religious facts, how can they be used to explain observable matters of history and science that clearly are factual?

It seems that the only credible option for the expressivist is to argue that religious explanations are really ways of expressing attitudes towards the explananda. It is, however, very difficult to see how this position can effectively be defended. Phillips suggests in some of his writings that some religious sentences that look like explanations should instead be thought of as expressing attitudes. For example, he imagines that people faced with a traumatic or difficult circumstance might conclude 'It is the will of God'. He argues that talking of God's will in this context is not explanatory. 'The notion of God's will is not related to what has happened as a highly *explanation*' (1988, p. 281).⁴ He elaborates as follows:

'It is the will of God' is not an answer to the question 'Why is this happening?' but one way in which someone may die to the desire to ask the question. The notion of God's will is formed, not in the search for explanations, but in the abandonment of explanations. (1995, pp. 281–2)

Faced with the events which befall them men have said, 'It's Fate', 'It's absurd', 'It's meaningless', 'That's how things are', 'That's life', 'That's the way the cookie crumbles' as well as 'It is the will of God'. (1988, p. 280)

Phillips is right to point out that 'It is God's will' is used in some contexts to express one's having come to terms with or accepting the event one is referring to. But it does not follow that the sentence does not conventionally have propositional content; namely, of the event referred to *that God willed it*.

Moreover, of the numerous examples of religious explanations, 'It is the will of God' is one of the least problematic for expressivism. This is so because calling something 'the will of God' can be understood predicatively and thereby fits the expressivist interpretative model in (16). Take, in contrast, the sentence:

26. God's planned creation of a world with human beings with free agency best explains the evidence of fine tuning conditions.

While we may not regard (26) as true, it is not clear how the expressivist can provide an interpretation of it that makes it expressive of an attitude rather than representative of a religious fact.

Conclusion

Religious expressivism faces a number of problems for which no convincing answers seem available. However, since the most serious of these problems arise from denying that religious sentences represent religious facts, moderate attitude theory does not encounter the same difficulties. Moderate attitude theorists argue that religious sentences represent religious facts, so they can be used in explanations and can be used in premises and embedded conditional sentences without upsetting the validity of religious arguments. Moderate attitude theorists also argue that religious sentences are conventionally used to express religious beliefs, so the position is clearly not an attempt to make the use of religious discourse compatible with atheism. Moreover, in proposing that religious sentences are also conventionally used to express non-cognitive states, the theory is able to do justice to the evidence and intuition that religious claims are intimately connected with people's feelings, motivations, and dispositions. Despite all of the bad press that attitude theory has received, albeit in its more radical forms, moderate attitude theory offers a defensible and plausible theory of religious language.

7

Reference

In the discussion of apophatic theology in Chapter 2, we saw that a serious objection could be raised against the theory on the basis of two assumptions:

1. God is a proper name.
2. Proper names express properties that determine their reference.

In this chapter we begin by examining these two premises, paying particular attention to the second descriptivist assumption, with a view to finding a generally defensible account of the meaning of 'God' as well as determining whether the apophatic position results in believers being unable to refer to God. Our discussion will later address the closely connected question of *how* 'God' designates God – and in general how a name designates its bearer.

Is God a proper name?

Premise (1) seems highly plausible. 'God' is standardly used to designate God and shares a number of key features with other proper names. Like other proper names such as 'Socrates', 'Hilary Clinton', 'Mars', 'France' and 'Seattle', 'God' designates its subject with no syntactic structure.¹ Also, along with many other proper names and unlike other noun phrases, 'God' is not combined with restrictive modifiers. That is, no additional qualifying information is needed (or appropriate) to know what object is being designated. While we do modify the term when speaking of, for instance, 'the god of the philosophers', it is not used as a proper name in this sentence. Rather, the expression is used to distinguish God from a being which is defined for debate in the philosophy

of religion and is *called* 'God'. More generally, the use of 'God' as a name and 'god' as a common noun is widely recognised and conventionally indicated by capitalisation. These points suggest that 'God' both syntactically and semantically resembles other proper names.

Mark Johnston has recently argued that 'God' was introduced in the Hebrew scriptures as a title or honorific expression rather than a name. 'It is quite unclear whether "God," as we now use it, is a *name* at all, as opposed to a compressed title, in effect something like "the Supreme Being" or "the Most High"' (2011, pp. 6–7). However, this provides only historical information about the use of the expression. Notably, terms that are introduced as titles can subsequently become names. For example, Edward Ellington was initially called 'Duke' apparently because his graceful manner and dress sense 'gave him the bearing of a young nobleman' (Terkel, 1975, p. 74). However, the legitimacy of 'Duke Ellington' or just 'Duke' as the name by which the musician subsequently and famously became known is not put into question by its initial use as an honorific or, indeed, by the fact that he was not a duke. So the historical use of the word 'God' as a title is not a sufficient reason for putting aside the semantic and syntactic evidence that 'God' is a proper name. I return to this issue later, but let us for the moment proceed on the assumption that 'God' is a proper name.

Descriptivism and non-descriptivism

Let us turn to (2), should we be descriptivists or non-descriptivists about 'God' and names in general? There is a long tradition, stretching back at least as far as Anselm, of taking 'God' to have a descriptive content. Anselm, in the development of his ontological argument, takes 'God' to be substitutable for 'than which nothing greater can be conceived'. From this he is able to argue that the 'fool' who believes that God is merely imaginary thereby believes that a being than which nothing greater can be conceived is merely imaginary. Also, contemporary work in the philosophy of religion often sets out various properties of God that are routinely said to *define* 'God'. This approach will, as we have seen, be unacceptable to apophatic theologians. But is it defensible? I begin by setting out some general theoretical considerations about descriptivist and non-descriptivist positions and then apply them to 'God'.

The classic statement of non-descriptivist theory is given by J. S. Mill: 'a proper name is but an unmeaning mark which we connect in our minds with the idea of the object, in order that whenever the mark meets our eyes or occurs to our thoughts, we may think of that individual

object' (1974, p. 35). In general, Mill thought, it is not the purpose of a proper name to convey any information about its referent, and a name's use does not depend on any property of the object that it names. As such, a proper name can refer to an object even though the object may change its properties or we may be mistaken in what its properties are. For example, the name 'Dartmouth' was given to a city in south-west England because it is situated at the mouth of the Dart River. But if the river were somehow to change its course away from Dartmouth, there is no reason to think the name of the city should or would change (1974, p. 33). Mill's theory is sometimes called the 'Fido'-Fido theory: a name refers to its bearer, and that is all there is to proper names. Since a proper name can refer without conveying any information about the object referred to, this theory would also suit apophatic theology. 'God' can refer to God, on the Millian theory, even if we cannot conceive of God's nature.

The Millian theory runs into a number of difficulties. Here are three widely discussed objections. One obvious problem is that if the meaning of a name is exhausted by its referring to an object, then names without corresponding objects, such as the names of fictional characters, lack meaning. But we seem to be able to construct meaningful sentences that employ empty names, such as

3. Medusa turns people into stone.

And (4) appears to be both meaningful and true:

4. Medusa does not really exist.

Although these sentences seem no less meaningful than similar sentences employing names for existing referents, on Mill's theory one of their principal constituents is meaningless. A second problem is that it follows from Millianism that different names that refer to the same object, such as 'George Orwell' and 'Eric Blair', should have the same meaning. Therefore, the sentences (5) and (6) should have the same meaning.

5. Eric Blair is the same person as Eric Blair.

6. Eric Blair is the same person as George Orwell.

However, (6) seems informative, *a posteriori*, and, as Frege put it, a potentially valuable extension of our knowledge, whereas (5) is *a priori* and analytically true. Millianism seems unable to explain this change in

the cognitive significance of sentences when co-referential expressions are substituted. A third problem concerns proper names embedded in belief ascriptions. For example, the sentences (7) and (8) differ only with respect to the substitution of 'Superman' with 'Clark Kent'.²

7. Lois Lane believes that Superman can travel faster than a speeding bullet.
8. Lois Lane believes that Clark Kent can travel faster than a speeding bullet.

According to Millianism, therefore, (7) and (8) should express the same proposition. However, this is not the case because (7) is true and (8) is false.

These problems motivated descriptivist alternatives, most notably those developed by Gottlob Frege (1892) and Bertrand Russell (1905), according to which a proper name is not an 'unmeaning mark' but expresses information that specifies its referent. According to Russell, proper names are disguised definite descriptions. He suggests that the name 'Bismarck', for example, might be associated with the description *the first Chancellor of the German Empire*. For Frege, a proper name has a sense as well as a reference. The sense of a name is a mode of presentation which determines the reference but does not have to be a disguised description expressible as a definite description.³ It could, for example, be perceptual; the way that something looks to a perceiver could be its mode of presentation. I mainly focus on the Russellian version of descriptivism, but the Fregean theory is an important alternative.

By giving descriptive content to a proper name, descriptivists are in a better position than Millians to address the above three problems. The first problem disappears because a proper name can be meaningful if it has no referent; the descriptive content remains the same whether or not the bearer exists. The changes in cognitive significance and truth values that occur when co-referring terms are substituted, highlighted by the second and third problems, can also be explained. If two names have different descriptive content but designate the same object, we would expect that exchanging one for the other would result in a change in the meaning and could result in a change in the truth value of a sentence in which they occur.

One difficulty recognised by early descriptivists is that different people might associate different descriptive contents with the same name. While one person might associate with 'Aristotle' the descriptive content *the student of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great*, another

might associate it with *the student of Plato born in Stageira in 384 BC*. Frege (1892) thought that such variations in sense were tolerable provided that the different senses specified the same reference (as they would in this case).⁴ However, variations in sense or descriptive content generate more serious problems for utterances about 'God'. If a Christian employs 'God' with the descriptive content *the creator of the universe, co-equal and coeternal with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit* and a Muslim associates 'God' with the descriptive content *the creator of the universe, a unique and absolute being*, then they will not be in agreement on any claim that they make about God. More generally if claims endorsed by one religion (or one religious sect) and rejected by others are built into the descriptive content of 'God', then speakers from different religions or sects are talking at cross-purposes when talking about God (Alston 1991, pp. 259–60). Christians and non-Christians, for example, would not be able to agree about God even on points of apparent accord because they would be referring to different things. This is a highly counterintuitive result.

Descriptivism is philosophically problematic for another reason. If someone associates the descriptive content *the creator of the universe, co-equal and coeternal with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit* with 'God', sentence (9) will be equivalent to (10).

9. God created the universe.
10. The creator of the universe, co-equal and coeternal with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, created the universe.

But this seems wrong: (10) is analytically true, while (9) does not seem analytic even to someone who already takes God to be the creator of the universe. In general, for a name *x* and a descriptive content *d*, descriptivism will have the result that '*x* is *d*' will be analytically true. This seems not to be the case.

A more sophisticated descriptivist position, suggested by Wittgenstein (1953, p. 79) and developed by Searle (1958), proposes that there is a cluster of descriptions associated with a proper name. A *cluster description* specifies a number of characteristic properties of the referent. A proper name can be appropriately used without all of the elements of the cluster description being satisfied. Searle sets out the position as follows:

Suppose we ask the users of the name 'Aristotle' to state what they regard as certain essential and established facts about him. Their answers would be a set of uniquely referring descriptive statements.

Now what I am arguing is that the descriptive force of 'This is Aristotle' is to assert that a sufficient but so far unspecified number of these statements are true of this object. (1958, p. 171)

The cluster theory, therefore, does not take any particular component of the cluster description or even the entire cluster description to be equivalent with the content of the name, thereby avoiding the problem of the analyticity of (9). A cluster theory of proper names applied to 'God' might also be able to avoid the problem of different content built into the name by believers in different religions. Suppose that the cluster of descriptions for 'God' included descriptions specific to Christian belief as well as descriptions specific to Muslim belief, without making any one of these descriptions necessary for the correct application of the name. Christians and Muslims would not therefore be referring to different things just by virtue of using the word 'God', provided that they use (or are disposed to use) descriptions from the same cluster.

It will already be obvious for the reasons given earlier that apophatics cannot accept the description theory of reference whether or not it is a cluster view. Any descriptive content that is used to pick out God by intrinsic properties will, according to apophatics, fail to succeed. However, a number of compelling objections against descriptivism, raised most notably by Keith Donnellan (1972), David Kaplan (1989), and Saul Kripke (1977; 1980), have led to a resurgence of interest in Millianism. Here are two of the objections.

First, one of the apparent advantages of descriptivism is that it provides an account of both the meaning of a name and how the name designates its bearer: a name is a shorthand definite description (on the Russellian version), and the designated object is the one that satisfies that description. But unfortunately, the use of an identifying definite description is not sufficient to designate an object. Suppose that Jane learns the name 'Shakespeare' at school and the key fact that she remembers is that Shakespeare is the author of *Hamlet*. When asked 'Who is Shakespeare?' she reliably tells us, 'The author of *Hamlet*'. According to descriptivism, 'The author of *Hamlet*' is a definite description that should give the content of the name and specify the designated object. But suppose that Francis Bacon wrote *Hamlet*. Jane's description would therefore be false of Shakespeare, and on the descriptivist theory 'Shakespeare' would either fail to pick out an object or designate Francis Bacon. However, it does not seem that Jane has been using the name 'Shakespeare' to talk about Bacon all this time. Rather, Jane has been talking about Shakespeare when she has said 'Shakespeare' but has a false belief about

him. The same problem can be raised for cluster theories. If we associate a variety of descriptions with the name 'Shakespeare' – that he is the author of *Hamlet*, was born in 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, and was a player with the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and so on – it seems that we could be systematically mistaken in all of these details while still referring to Shakespeare. Descriptivism therefore seems to yield the wrong conclusion about what a name refers to.

Second, speakers can refer to objects while lacking the descriptive resources that descriptivism requires that they have. Suppose that Jane hears that David Attenborough is a naturalist. Being a naturalist is the only property that she confidently associates with the name 'David Attenborough'. However, being a naturalist clearly does not uniquely identify David Attenborough; nor does Jane believe that there is just one naturalist. Nevertheless, it seems that Jane successfully refers to Richard Attenborough when she uses his name even though the name lacks the descriptive content to uniquely specify the person named. These two arguments, sometimes called arguments from error and ignorance (Devitt and Sterelny, 1999), support the Millian idea that a proper name refers to its referent without mediation by a descriptive content.⁵

Non-descriptivism again

The problems generated for descriptivism have led to a revival in non-descriptivist theories of reference. These have an obvious attraction for apophatic theologians because they allow for reference to God even with systematic failure in the descriptions that we might associate with the use of the name. Since apophaticism takes many of our descriptions of God to be false but assumes that we are able to refer to God, non-descriptivist theories appear to offer a happy way out of the objection that the theory undermines reference to God. However, non-descriptivist theories should have a broader appeal in philosophy of religion. Interestingly, William Alston is sympathetic to a non-descriptivist theory as one that allows people with false beliefs about God to be able to talk about God. Although he thinks that God can be truly represented and would reject apophaticism, Alston contends that if descriptions associated with 'God' were untrue – perhaps because of misunderstanding or the limitations of our sinful nature – and fail to represent any real object, then 'people are referring to, addressing prayers to, worshiping, *God*, but, unfortunately, are radically misinformed about His nature and purposes' (1989, p. 111). So while Alston does not believe that we are entirely in error, he takes

the possibility of radical error as grounds for preferring the theory that the designation of 'God' is not determined by descriptive content.

Millian theories also entirely avoid the problem described earlier with believers in different religions or sects associating different descriptions with God, resulting in incompatibilities between the content of 'God' as used by different speakers. Unlike descriptivism, a Millian theory of 'God' has no need to posit a cluster description that different religious believers are disposed to use. Millianism also escapes a problem with descriptivist theories that result from philosophical difficulties concerning the internal consistency of some divine predicates. For example, a well-known problem with omnipotence is the paradox of the stone (Savage, 1967): if God can create a stone too heavy for him to lift, then there is something that he cannot do (lift the stone that he has created), but if God cannot create a stone that is too heavy for him to lift, then there is also something that he cannot do (create the stone). A non-descriptivist theory of religious reference ensures that these problems do not undermine talk of God. Since reference to God is not secured by description, even if some of the principal predicates used of God are paradoxical, 'God' can still refer to God.

Should we therefore adopt a Millian theory of the meaning of names, that all that a name contributes to the meaning of a sentence is its referent? As we have seen, it follows from the Millian view that different names with the same referent will have the same meaning. Johnston, who endorses a Millian theory for names in general, believes that this point can be used to show that the Millian theory does not apply to 'God' and that 'God' is not a name.

it is coherent to doubt, as the second-century theologian Marcion did, whether Yahweh is in fact God. Marcion also doubted that the god who appeared to Abraham was God. If Marcion was wrong about this, then his mistakes were not about the meanings of words. They would be mistakes as to the theological facts of the matter. This itself entails that 'Yahweh' does not mean 'God,' ...If those were equivalences in meaning, then there would be no room for the relevant factual mistakes. (2011, p. 6)

The argument might be rephrased as follows.

11. Marcion believes that Yahweh is God.
12. Marcion believes that God is God.

(11) and (12) differ only with respect to 'Yahweh' being substituted for 'God', but (11) is false and (12) is true. This shows, according to Johnston, that 'Yahweh' cannot mean the same as 'God'. For suppose that Yahweh is God: Marcion will have made a theological mistake in thinking that Yahweh is not God, but he can hardly be accused of believing that God is not God, which would be a trivial linguistic blunder. But Johnston presents what is really a problem for the Millian theory of names as if it were a reason to think that 'God' is not a name. The objection is a version of the objection given earlier against Millianism: exchanging co-referring names embedded in propositional attitude attributions can result in a change in the truth value of those attributions. So this objection is not especially relevant to *religious* reference and provides no better reason to think that 'God' is not a name than that 'George Orwell' and 'Eric Blair' are not names.

The problem with the substitution of co-referring names is a reminder that for all of the seemingly insurmountable difficulties with descriptivism, the objections to Millianism raised earlier remain unresolved. A great deal of recent work in the philosophy of language has been directed towards addressing these objections. One promising attempt to resolve the difficulty of name substitution in propositional attitude ascriptions relies on the distinction between the content of a sentence and what it suggests or implies (Salmon, 1986).⁶ Take the earlier example of Lois Lane's beliefs about Superman. If the names 'Superman' and 'Clark Kent' have no descriptive content and Superman is the same person as Clark Kent, then it seems that (7) and (8) must be saying the same thing. So on the Millian interpretation, it follows that both sentences are true and Lois Lane *does* believe that Clark Kent can travel faster than a speeding bullet. Why, therefore, does (8) appear to be false? It's because it *implies* a different sentence that *is* false. When we say (8), we imply that Lois Lane would assent to the proposition that Kent travels faster than a speeding bullet, where Kent is presented under the guise of a mild-mannered reporter for the *Daily Planet*. But clearly this implied claim is false: Lois would not agree with the proposition when presented under the guise given by (8). In general, according to this defence of Millianism, the problem cases of substitution can be explained by our mistaking the proposition expressed by a sentence about propositional attitudes with what the utterance implies about the believer's perspective on that identity claim.

The same point can be applied to the Marcion example. If Yahweh is God, then in believing that God is God, Marcion also believes that Yahweh is God. The reason that (12) is true while (11) seems false is that

(11) implies something false about Marcion's perspective on the matter, namely, that he would assent to the following:

13. Yahweh is God.

However, (11) does not say – it is not part of the content of (11) – that Marcion would himself agree with (13). It follows from this defence of Millianism that Marcion is not making a trivial linguistic error in arguing that Yahweh is not God, as Johnston suggests. Rather, his mistake is in failing to get the right perspective on God: he fails to recognise God under the guise of God who appeared to Moses.⁷

The best way of addressing the objections to modern forms of Millianism or, indeed, whether they can be solved remain controversial topics in the philosophy of language. Unsurprisingly, there have also been attempts to revive descriptivist theories of reference, albeit in a different form to those devised by Frege and Russell. A particularly notable recent form of descriptivism, called the *nominal description theory* (NDT), has been defended by Kent Bach (2002).⁸ According to this view, the content of a proper name *N* is 'the bearer of "*N*"' or 'the object named "*N*"'. So, for example, the name 'Yahweh' should be interpreted as 'the bearer of "Yahweh"', the name 'Clark Kent' should be interpreted as 'the bearer of "Clark Kent"', and so on. Unlike other description theories, NDT does not take a name to express any *substantive* properties that identify the designated object. 'Kurt Gödel' is not equivalent to, for example, 'the logician who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic', and competent use of this name does not rely on the speaker associating a correct description with the name or any substantive property at all. NDT thereby avoids the ignorance and error arguments. However, correct use of the name does require that the speaker recognise the nominal property, specified by NDT, that Kurt Gödel is the bearer of 'Kurt Gödel': one could not competently use the name 'Kurt Gödel' to refer to Kurt Gödel without knowing that it names him. NDT also avoids the problem with substituting co-referring names. Since 'God' expresses the property of bearing the name 'God' and 'Yahweh' expresses the distinct property of bearing the name 'Yahweh', the theory does not require that (11) and (12) should be equivalent nor, in general, that different names of the same object should be substitutable in propositional attitude contexts.

NDT may initially appear a puzzling solution to the difficulties generated by descriptivism because when we use a name *x*, we do not generally take it to have the meaning 'the bearer of *x*'. However, NDT is a theory about the meaning of names not a theory of what we are thinking about

or communicating when we are using a name. It follows from NDT that the meaning of the sentence 'God is good' is 'The bearer of "God" is good', but what is communicated and what a speaker is thinking when using this sentence may just be about God and not about the bearer of God's name. Even so, speakers are using a sentence about the bearer of God's name to communicate something directly about God. Speakers can use sentences to communicate something other than what the sentence strictly says.

We are left, therefore, with two promising theories about the content of names, NDT and a sophisticated development of Millianism, either of which provide defensible options for understanding the meaning of 'God'. NDT offers, I think, the most satisfactory and problem-free treatment of the content of names currently available. However, for our current purposes, it is not critical to settle the issue between these options because their implications for religious language are similar. Notably, both theories are compatible with apophatic theology: there is no descriptive content to 'God' on the Millian theory, while according to NDT, the descriptive content is not of any intrinsic property of God. We should note, however, that both theories require additional caution in the discussion of divine properties: while there may be properties of God, even necessary ones, they are not part of the *definition* or *meaning* of 'God'.

Adopting one of these accounts of the meaning of 'God' does not, of course, prevent the introduction of 'God' as a descriptive name. That is, it is possible to use 'God' as the name for a bearer that satisfies a certain description, and this is sometimes the way in which it is introduced into philosophical discussion. An example of a descriptive name is 'Jack the Ripper'. The name designates a person (whoever it is) who murdered five women in Whitechapel in 1888. If someone we believed to be Jack the Ripper subsequently turned out not to be the murderer, then we would no longer think that person was Jack the Ripper. The descriptive name 'Jack the Ripper' tracks the person who satisfies the associated description. But 'God' is not generally used in religious discourse as a descriptive name but as the name of the being that has had direct or indirect contact with the lives and experience of religious believers. Religious believers may take God to have certain properties, but there is nothing in the meaning of 'God' that guarantees that what they are referring to actually possesses these properties.

Referring to God

The other half of the problem of reference is to explain how the name 'God' successfully picks out God if this is not achieved by the descriptive

content of the proper name. However, non-descriptivists have developed an answer. Whereas Millianism offered only a theory of the content of proper names, Donnellan (1972) and Kripke (1980) supplemented their critique of descriptivism with a causal theory of *how* names are connected with their referents. Subsequently this theory has become widely accepted.

To illustrate the theory, consider the example given by Saul Kripke of the name 'Jonah'. The descriptions of Jonah available to us from the Bible include that he was a prophet from Israel, was ordered by God to go to the city of Nineveh, and was swallowed by a whale or large fish in which he remained for three days. Kripke invites us to consider what might be found if we were to discover the truth about the historical Jonah. It might turn out that there was a real person upon whom the biblical stories were based, one who led a more mundane life, was not really swallowed by a whale, was not a prophet from Israel, and was not ordered by God to go to the city of Nineveh. Although the biblical descriptions (and the descriptions that we associate with the name) are therefore false, the name refers to this individual. This provides another example of the error argument that we considered earlier: our description or a cluster description can be entirely mistaken, and yet the associated name can successfully pick out its object. But the example also suggests that the referent of a name is not determined by consulting the descriptions associated with the name. Instead, we trace back to the individual that prompted those stories.

According to the *causal theory of reference*, a name is initially linked to its referent by actually being named – an 'initial baptism', as Kripke calls it. The initial baptism is taken to typically involve perceptual contact with the referent. An object is named by someone perceiving it and naming it, perhaps by ostentation; the reference of the name is thereby fixed. The name is then passed on to other people, many of whom may not have direct perceptual contact with the referent. Subsequent use of the name as it is passed on through speech communities remains linked to the referent by a causal chain to the initial baptism. Over time, the object may have ceased to exist, but the use of name retains its link to the referent by this causal link to the original naming event. The link with the referent remains even if the descriptions that speakers associate with it are incomplete or mistaken.

The causal theory of reference provides an attractive account of how a name can be 'fixed' to a referent without having descriptive content. Moreover, it looks straightforwardly applicable to 'God'. In Moses's encounter with God something akin to a naming ceremony occurs.

Then Moses said to God, 'If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, "the God of your fathers has sent me to you," and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' And he said, 'Say this to the people of Israel, "I AM has sent me to you."' (Exodus 3, 13–15)

Adopting the causal theory, however, requires causal contact between God and humans, whereby humans are able to name God. This method of fixing the reference of God is defended in detail by Alston (1991). God is not named literally by ostentation according to Alston but rather is picked out by attending to a perceived entity such as occurs in a religious experience; this naming event is causally connected to other speakers through communal worship and other religious activities. There may, of course, be *many* naming events as other people gain direct experiential acquaintance with God. Further evaluation of this would take us too far off topic into metaphysical issues about causal interactions between God and human beings. We should note, however, that adopting a causal reference theory for 'God' imposes the additional metaphysical commitment that it is possible to come into perceptual contact with God. In the apophatic case, at least, this is a commitment that they would perhaps be happy to accept. Denys, for example, suggests that it is possible to experience union with God (1987, p. 109) and that Moses underwent such an experience.⁹

It is tempting to complete the account of reference with the causal theory: 'God' refers to the being picked out by the initial baptism. Despite the plausibility of the causal theory, however, there remains a stubbornly persistent intuition that in the case of 'God', perhaps uniquely among names, descriptive information plays an essential role in that process. This is brought out by the conflicting intuitions that we have about the following type of case. Suppose that a community of religious believers became convinced that the being that they had been calling 'God' is in fact malevolent and imperfect. What would their reaction be? One reaction that we would expect is that they would concede that they had been using 'God' to name a malevolent and imperfect being and that they had made a terrible mistake. This reaction is in line with the causal theory of reference. However, we might also expect a different reaction: they might conclude that God does not really exist or that they had misidentified God; they might, for example, attempt to reassign the name to another being. This reaction is more in line with the designation of the name being determined by a description. Even if we do not endorse a descriptive theory of names, perhaps we should therefore find

more of a role for descriptions than provided for by non-descriptivism and the causal theory of reference? Let's look at two recent attempts to modify the causal theory by introducing information into the specification of the bearer of 'God'.

Hybrid theories

One widely discussed objection to the causal theory of reference is the problem it has with explaining how names change their reference. A nice example of this, given by Gareth Evans (1973), is the change of reference of the name 'Madagascar'. The name originally referred to a portion of the African mainland but now refers to an island off the east coast of Africa. Marco Polo was apparently the first speaker to use the name to refer to the island. He did not (let us assume) intend to introduce a novel use of 'Madagascar' but misinterpreted the name that he inherited from other speakers. If the causal theory of reference is right, Evans contends, then for Marco Polo and subsequent speakers (including ourselves) 'Madagascar' actually refers to the mainland of Africa. This is so because the use of the name is causally linked back to an original naming of a region of the mainland. However, we clearly use 'Madagascar' to refer to the island.

Evans's solution to this and similar problems of reference change is to combine elements of both the causal and descriptive theories of reference. He proposes that the reference of a proper name, as it is used by a speaker, is the 'dominant' causal source of the descriptive information that the speaker associates with that name. The causal theory, according to Evans, 'has mislocated the causal relation; the important causal relation lies between that item's states and doings and the speaker's body of information – not between the item's being dubbed with a name and the speaker's contemporary use of it' (1973, p. 301). So, in the case of 'Madagascar', the reference shift occurs at the point at which the 'dominant' cause of the information that users of the name associate with it is the island rather than a region on the African mainland.

Evans's theory explains how reference change can occur while retaining a key advantage of the causal theory, because a causal connection between name and its referent is a necessary condition for successful reference. The theory also avoids some of the pitfalls of descriptivism. For example, there is no difficulty with inadequacies in our description of the referent on Evans's theory because it is not required that the referent satisfy the descriptions that the speaker associates with the name, only that the object is the dominant cause of those descriptions.

Some of the descriptions could also be in error, provided that the false descriptions are similarly caused by the object that the name designates. Let's call this the *hybrid* theory.

Does this hybrid of causal and descriptivist theory do justice to our intuitions about 'God'? Meghan Sullivan (2012) defends the hybrid position but sees its main virtues in explaining how 'God' might undergo reference *failure* rather than a reference shift. The theory is developed in the following way. If the descriptive information about an object associated with a name became extensively polluted by false information that was not caused by that object but resulted from various misunderstandings or deliberate fictions, whereby the object would cease to be the 'dominant cause' of that information, it follows from the hybrid theory that the name would fail to refer. For example, suppose that in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve use 'God' to refer to God. The dominant cause of the descriptive information they associate with the name 'God' is caused by God, thereby satisfying Evans's criteria for reference. However, after the Fall, God hides. Following the hybrid theory, Sullivan argues that for some time after the Fall, 'God' successfully refers to God but that after a while, if false information were added by either incautious or malicious speakers to the body of information associated with 'God', then the name would cease to designate anything. The hybrid theory thereby gives a role to descriptive information in the designation of 'God' while also explaining cases of reference shift and failure that seem to be possible for 'God' as much as for any other name.

However, the problem of reference change is one that the causal theory of reference should have the resources to meet by allowing that there is often not just one 'initial baptism' for a name. Rather, numerous uses of a name to pick out an object with which speakers are in causal-perceptual contact establishes that object as the bearer.¹⁰ The name 'Madagascar' that Marco Polo misinterpreted conventionally designated a region of the mainland of Africa by virtue of its causal links to multiple uses of 'Madagascar' to name that region by speakers with causal-perceptual relations to it. But after Marco Polo's misunderstanding, the name is frequently used to talk about the island. At this point the conventions for the use of the name have become confused as the name has been causally linked to two distinct territories: it can designate either the island or a portion of the mainland. After a time 'Madagascar' is used only with causal-perceptual connection to the island; this is the pattern of namings that we inherit from our ancestors. So with a modest extension, it seems that the causal theory is capable of accounting for the phenomenon of reference change that motivates Evans's alternative.

In addition to the doubts about the case in its favour, hybrid theory imposes standards of successful reference that look problematic in religion. Consider, for example, the Adam and Eve story given above. Suppose it were the case that God had ceased contact with humans at a very early stage of history and that the information that religious believers associate with 'God' subsequently became supplemented with stories about God and God's contact with the world that were not caused by God. It seems to follow from the hybrid theory that the name that we have inherited does not refer to anything. In contrast, the causal theory is entirely forgiving of false descriptions provided that the causal link to the naming of God by Adam and Eve is preserved. Now suppose that God re-establishes contact with humans and we discover all of the inaccuracies that had built up over thousands of years. It seems that we would say that, despite the accretion of myths and misleading descriptions, we had been referring to God all along rather than that we had been failing to talk of God. In this example, the causal theory looks more plausible than the hybrid theory. We should note, however, that it is difficult to be sure what the hybrid theory would say about this case since it relies on an undefined notion of 'dominant cause'. It is possible that a sufficiently lenient analysis of 'dominant cause' could be given to allow that God is the 'dominant cause' of our mistaken descriptions of God in this example. The lack of clarity about 'dominant cause' is itself an outstanding problem for the hybrid theory.

There is another problem with the application of hybrid theory to religious language. A worry about descriptivism raised earlier is that it potentially undermines agreement and disagreement about God between speakers in different religions. If descriptions distinctive of a monotheistic religion formed part of the descriptive information associated with 'God', then speakers of different religions would not be referring to the same object when they used the name. Hybrid theory seems to have a related and similarly troubling result. Different religious traditions and different sects within the same religion associate significantly different and often contrary descriptive information with the name 'God'. It seems plausible that God is not the 'dominant' cause of many of these differences and inconsistencies but that they are the result of human misunderstandings or inventions. However, this puts into question whether speakers in different monotheistic religions and in different sects of the same religion are talking about the same object when speaking of 'God'. Suppose that there is one form of monotheist religion for which God has been the principal and ongoing dominant cause of the descriptive information that its speakers employ. The

speakers of that religion will successfully refer to God. Speakers in other forms of monotheism for which this has not been the case will not be talking about the same object; they will, in fact, not be talking about any object. This is not, of course, compelling argument against Evans's theory. It shows, however, that the theory imposes counterintuitively stern requirements for successful reference to God.

The causal theory with descriptive conditions

A different way of including descriptive information in the determination of the reference of 'God' is suggested by Jerome Gellman. He proposes that in naming an object there have to be 'parameters for appropriate naming of candidates' that specify the kind of thing that is being referred to (1997, p. 29).¹¹ For example, while all of the stories about Jonah and our information about the kind of person that Jonah was might be in error, it seems that Jonah had to be a *person*. If it turns out that Jonah was not a person but was a piece of driftwood that was misperceived as a person and prompted the construction of various fictions, Gellman suggests, we would conclude that 'Jonah' fails to refer. In general, naming seems to presuppose some view of the speaker about the kind of thing that is being named whereby it 'constitutes a proper candidate for the receiving of the name' (1997, pp. 26–27). So in naming a bearer, at least some of the descriptions that a speaker associates with the bearer must be true of it for the name to successfully refer. Gellman makes two further points. First, he claims that 'when naming we are generally aware, to one degree or another and in various degrees of explicitness or vagueness, what a proper naming-candidate must be like for the naming game being played' (1997, p. 27). Second, he sets out the descriptive information that a speaker must have to successfully refer to God: 'it is generally a necessary condition of successfully naming a being "god" that it names what we shall call a "*supremely valuable being*," or simply a "*supreme being*"' (1997, p. 32).

Gellman aims to combine elements of both a causal and descriptivist theory of reference: the reference of 'God' is fixed by causal connection with initial baptisms *but* an associated description provides necessary conditions for the type of object that the name can refer to. The associated description is that God is the *supreme being*. If the name successfully picks out anything at all, it must be the supreme being. But contrary to descriptivism, Gellman takes the description to be insufficient to identify a specific bearer; for that a causal connection with the referent is required.

It seems plausible that at the point of naming an object, the speaker has an idea of the type of object that is being named. It follows that some (minimal) descriptive information forms part of the initial baptism(s) of the bearer of a name. However, Gellman's two ways of developing this idea go much further than this, and both look problematic. Taking his first point, why should the fact that the baptisers of a name have some general idea of the thing that they are naming require that subsequent users of that name have the same general idea? Suppose that Laura, with no knowledge of religion, picks up the name 'God' from overheard snippets of conversations. She has the idea, perhaps, that God is an agent of some kind but cannot confidently say anything else about God. Nevertheless, it seems that Laura should be able to refer to God despite her lack of theological sophistication. This is, of course, a variant of the ignorance argument raised earlier against descriptivism, and it seems similarly effective against Gellman's theory that speakers must be aware that God is a supreme being.

Taking the second point, why should the description associated with 'God' have to be 'supreme being'? Suppose that Jane, with no detailed knowledge of any monotheistic theology, has a religious experience. She has, say, an extraordinary feeling of overwhelming love being directed towards her and finds it difficult to put into words but also very important. Jane identifies *God* as the cause of this experience although she is not thinking (even inexplicitly) of a 'supreme being' and may even lack the concept of a supreme being. It seems that, in this case, Jane could successfully name 'God' even though the concept of 'supreme being' is not playing any role in her thinking about God or in her naming God. Perhaps Jane is subsequently introduced to a monotheistic community and subsequently believes that God has various essential properties and is the supreme being. These beliefs, however, would be ones that Jane forms about God and are not requisite to her using 'God' to refer to God. She seems capable of referring to the same object before and after her religious education.

Conclusion

If neither of the proposed ways of modifying the causal theory of reference – requiring that God is the 'dominant' cause of our descriptions or placing descriptive conditions on naming God – are persuasive, this leaves the problem that led to our considering these options. We would expect that upon finding that the being apparently identified by 'God' had all along been malevolent and imperfect, some believers would conclude

either that there is no God or suppose that a different being should be called 'God'. However, causal theorists could explain this reaction as the result of the relationship that religious believers take themselves to have to God as a being worthy of worship and praise and obedience, rather than supposing that the name 'God' has descriptive content. Notably, we could imagine some religious believers, as well as those who do not believe that there is a God, concluding from the imagined discovery that God is malevolent. Other religious believers might be motivated to conclude that God is some being other than the one they had been referring to, but that would require an effort of newly designating 'God' to pick out a different being. If this is right, then what determines the reference of 'God' is, as for 'Isaac Newton' and any other name, the causal connection between the use of the name and the named object. The difference between referring to God and referring to Isaac Newton is that in the former case there are different surrounding practices of worship and devotion that (for some religious believers) would make the reference of 'God' – if found to be malevolent – unsuited as an object of religious belief. It is these other factors, rather than descriptive conditions contained in the content of the name 'God', that might motivate a change in how 'God' is used.

This discussion of reference leaves us with a range of options that is, I think, suitably inclusive in the ways in which speakers can refer to God. By rejecting classic forms of descriptivism either as a theory of the content of 'God' or as the way in which the bearer of 'God' is specified, it is possible to be ignorant or in error about God while still being able to refer to God. God can still be referred to by people with wildly mistaken theories about God. This is also good news for apophaticism: God can also be referred to even if we are unable to conceive of God's nature.

Part II

Religious Truth

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8

Introduction

‘Reductionism’ has been used to refer to a variety of philosophical positions, but as a theory about the meaning and truth of sentences – and as I use it here – it refers to theories that give the truth conditions for sentences that are apparently about a certain range of phenomena in terms of sentences about some other range of phenomena. We can call these (following Dummett, 1991, p. 322) the *disputed* and *reduced* class of sentences, respectively. Reductionists argue that the disputed sentences of language do not have their face value subject matter but are instead about the subject matter described by the reduced sentences. Here are three famous examples of reductionism about non-religious language.

Phenomenalism is the view that the truth conditions for sentences about the external world should be given by sentences about our actual or possible experiences. This theory has its origins in work by George Berkeley (1949) and John Stuart Mill (1979). Mill characterised material objects as ‘permanent possibilities of sensation’ (1974, p. 58) and had a notable method for interpreting sentences about physical objects that are not currently being perceived: their truth should be determined by conditional sentences about what one would perceive under certain conditions. For example, the truth of (1) might be determined by the truth of the conditional (2).

1. There is a chair in the next room.
2. Were one to go into the next room, one would see a chair.

This analysis reduces a statement about the external world in the disputed class to a statement from the reduced class about what one would perceive under certain circumstances. The theory was subsequently developed by Mach (1959) and Carnap (1937), and its formulation as a variety of truth

conditional reductionism is nicely summarised by Ayer: 'every empirical statement about a physical object, whether it seems to refer to a scientific entity or to an object of the more familiar kind that we normally claim to perceive, is reducible to a statement, or set of statements, which refer exclusively to sense-data' (Ayer, 1956, p. 118).

Behaviourism, in its 'analytical' or 'logical' form, is a reductionist theory of sentences that attribute mental states. Aiming to avoid a commitment to a mysterious substance dualism and the attending problems of mental causation, as well as make talk of mental states accessible to scientific assessment, behaviourists propose that sentences in the disputed class are made true by a reduced class of sentences about an agent's observable behaviour and testable dispositions to behave under different circumstances. For example, sentence (3) might be analysed by a string of conditional sentences (4).

3. Boris is thirsty
4. If Boris were offered a drink of water, then he would accept; if Boris were asked whether he were thirsty, he would agree; ...

This is, of course, a simplified example since the conditionals will have to be much more complicated. For instance, if Boris were thirsty but did not want to admit to that fact, then we should not expect him to agree to being thirsty if asked. Behaviourism was most famously advocated in philosophy by Gilbert Ryle (1949)¹ and is associated with Wittgenstein's later work on the philosophy of mind (though many would dispute that Wittgenstein was a behaviourist).² Although behaviourism in the classic form presented here faces insurmountable objections,³ a closely related theory has more recently been defended by Daniel Dennett (2005) under the guise of 'heterophenomenology'.

Ethical naturalism proposes a reduction of the disputed class of ethical sentences to a reduced class of sentences about natural phenomena (Jackson, 1998). Naturalists believe the universe is made up of only natural facts and properties, where natural facts and properties are those posited and studied by the natural sciences. For naturalists, moral commitments can seem puzzling: they seem to posit ethical properties that are intrinsically evaluative and not clearly available for assessment or even recognition by science. However, if moral properties like *good* or *ought to be done* could be identified with natural properties, such as the maximisation of happiness, then moral properties are just a type of natural property. As above, this is a simplified example, but the naturalist might take the truth condition of an ethical sentence such as (5) to be given by (6).

5. *P* is something that we should do.
6. *P* is the action that maximises happiness.

Moral discourse thereby becomes a way of talking about natural, psychological properties.

Reductionism is motivated by two ideas. The first, which can clearly be seen from the above examples, is that the phenomena that are apparently described by the disputed sentences are seen by reductionists as in some way philosophically problematic. There may be a priori or empirical grounds for doubting that the phenomena in question exist or that we could have reliable beliefs about them. These philosophical concerns are sufficiently serious, according to the reductionist, that they provide grounds for supposing that the area of language in question, if taken at face value, is largely in error. For example, phenomenalism is motivated by an epistemological worry about how we can know anything about physical objects when only sensations are directly available to our perceptual experience; ethical naturalism finds the ethical properties posited by ethical sentences difficult to square with a naturalistic metaphysics. In contrast, the range of phenomena described by the reduced class of sentences is seen by the reductionist as philosophically respectable in that it is not, or at least not to the same extent, subject to the same types of objection. Reductionists aim to resolve the philosophical objections to the disputed discourse by making its truth conditions sentences from the reduced class.

The second idea, which is less apparent from the above examples but no less important, is that there are good reasons to preserve the disputed discourse. Since reductionists propose to interpret the class of disputed sentences in terms of a reduced class of sentences, why not instead simply eliminate use of the former sentences and replace them with the sentences from the reduced class? Moreover, for the reasons given above, reductionists regard sentences from the disputed class to be false *if taken at face value*. An eliminativist strategy would have the additional advantage of replacing sentences that have the misleading appearance of describing philosophically dubious entities. So reductionists need a reason for continuing to use the disputed class of sentences. In some cases, elimination may not be a viable option. For instance, a reductionist about biology might argue that the truth of biological sentences about organic phenomena is determined by the truth of sentences of physics and chemistry about phenomena at a smaller scale. However, the sentences of chemistry and physics to which the biological sentences can be reduced may be very long and complicated; moreover,

in many cases scientists do not have enough information to say what these reductions are. So even if the truth of biological sentences depends on the truth of sentences of physics and chemistry, replacing biological discourse with discourse about physics and chemistry is not a practical option. Another reason to prefer reductionism to eliminativism is if there are social merits in the use of the disputed sentences. This may be the case for ethical sentences; notably, individuals who do not engage in ethical discourse do not make promising role models. An ethical naturalist may thereby wish to retain ethical discourse even though the truth conditions of ethical sentences are given by (say) sentences about human happiness.

Together, these points provide a context in which reductionism looks like a potentially attractive theory. The disputed discourse is one that is either undesirable or impractical to eliminate, but it also appears to commit its speakers to systematic error. Reductionism offers a way out of the problem that is charitable to speakers. While a region of discourse might look, on a face value reading, to be about a range of philosophically contentious phenomena, according to the reductionist, it is really about a distinct range of uncontroversial phenomena described by the reduced sentences. Reductionism provides a way of talking and thinking about the phenomena without raising (or raising fewer) metaphysical or epistemological objections.

Religious reductionism follows a similar pattern to other kinds of reductionism. The first motivation given above is particularly prominent in writings on religious reductionism. For example, Spinoza's reductionist account was motivated by monism, while reductionists of the early twentieth century such as Julian Huxley and Henry Wieman (a leading figure in the still ongoing 'religious empiricism' movement in theology) sought a reduction that made religious language compatible with naturalism. Gordon Kaufman, while he does not endorse naturalism, provides a reductive approach to religion whereby religious sentences do not posit supernatural entities. Religious reductionists are also broadly sympathetic to the continued use of religious discourse (given a successful reductive analysis of its meaning) although, as we see in the following chapter, they are often sketchy on the reasons for retaining religious discourse.

In general, a successful reduction of religious language needs to do four things: (a) provide a basis for doubting the truth of religious sentences when they are given a face value reading; (b) provide a reduced class of philosophically uncontroversial sentences and explain how religious sentences are to be reduced to them; (c) provide

reasons for preserving religious language rather than replacing it with the reduced language; (d) provide evidence in favour of the proposed reductive interpretation. Reductionists need to supply supporting reasons for supposing that the reduced class of sentences do in fact give the truth conditions for the disputed class of sentences; otherwise the reduction will just involve changing the subject of religious language rather than giving a plausible interpretation of its meaning. Achieving all four of these objectives is a tall order, particularly for religious language (in Chapter 9 the lengthy history of unsuccessful attempts is discussed).

Religious minimalism, a theory which has its origins in Wittgenstein's remarks and lectures on religion, offers a considerably more substantial and interesting challenge to the face value approach to religious truth than reductionism. Whereas reductionism requires a successful and well-evidenced reductive analysis of religious language, which is open to a number of objections, minimalism relies primarily on the *deflationary* account of truth that was introduced in Chapter 6. Rather than proceeding on the basis of a metaphysical theory, such as naturalism, minimalists claim to be merely describing language use; they aim to 'leave everything as it is', as Wittgenstein puts it, and their method 'may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it' (1953, p. 124). In the following I introduce minimalism in fairly general terms and focus in on religious minimalism in Chapter 10, where I also review some of the main lines of objection that have been presented against the theory in the philosophy of religion. In Chapter 11 I develop what I think is the most convincing line of argument against a minimalist interpretation of religious truth.

What is minimalism?

Minimalism is based on deflationary theories of truth and truth-apt or propositional content.⁴ According to the deflationary theory of truth, which was outlined in Chapter 6, the content of truth is largely exhausted by the disquotational schema (DS), where 'S' may be replaced by any sentence.

(DS) 'S' is true if and only if S.

DS, along with anything deriving from it, gives us all that is informative that can in general be said about truth. The deflationary theory of truth-apt or propositional content is the view that for a sentence

to have such content, it need only be able to satisfy DS. On this view, any significant declarative sentence will have truth-apt content (Boghossian, 1990).

How should we interpret DS? The minimalist proposes that we take DS as linking the truth of a sentence (the left-hand side) with the endorsement of *S* (the right-hand side). That is, a reason for endorsing a sentence is a reason for regarding it as true, and vice versa. Given this reading of DS, the schema is preserved if we analyse the truth of a sentence in terms of the justification to endorse that sentence. One way of doing this – we shall consider some others presently – analyses truth as warranted assertibility. Warranted assertibility is the property of being warranted, according the standards of justification of the discourse in question and with the best evidence that is in principle available, to assert some sentence. If we are in a position to regard *S* as warrantably assertible, then we are also in a position to endorse *S*; if we are in a position to endorse *S*, following the minimalist reading of DS, we are in a position to regard *S* as true. It follows that grounds for being warranted to assert *S* are grounds for *S* being true, and vice versa. The minimalist theory of propositional content is that any significant sentence that satisfies DS, and thereby is something that we can be in principle justified in asserting or rejecting, has propositional content. In general, I take the deflationary strategy to analyse truth and truth-apt content in terms of the satisfaction of DS; I take the minimalist strategy to analyse truth and truth-apt content (and the satisfaction of DS) in terms of justification.

When applied to religious discourse, it can be seen that minimalism quickly wins through to an account of religious truth. Religious sentences, as we can see in (7), clearly satisfy DS.

7. 'God is omnipotent' if and only if God is omnipotent.

Religious sentences can thereby be true by being suitably justified or appropriately satisfying the internal standards of warrant of religious discourse. Religious sentences also satisfy the conditions required by minimalism for possessing propositional content.

It might be objected that this can't be a sufficient account of truth in religion because religious sentences are made true by *facts* and *refer* to God, and so on. However, as we saw in Chapter 6, it is a trivial matter to extend the deflationary strategy beyond truth to other contentious terms. Such and such is a *fact*, for example, just in case the sentence reporting it is true. Reference might be analysed as a property of singular

terms that occur in true sentences. The minimalist might also make use of the notion that true sentences *correspond* to reality. One way of doing this is as follows (Wright, 1992, p. 25). Paraphrase the correspondence platitude that true statements correspond with the facts as:

(CP) '*P*' is true if and only if things are as '*P*' says they are.

Now, suppose that we affirm:

8. '*P*' says that *P*.

It follows that:

9. Things are as '*P*' says they are if and only if *P*.

Applying DS to (9) yields CP. Perhaps a stronger-looking construal of correspondence will be demanded, such as:

(CP*) '*P*' is true because *P*.

But CP* can also be secured by the minimalist from CP (Horwich, 1998, ch. 7). For if '*P*' says that *P*, it follows that things are as '*P*' says they are because it is true that *P*. That is, '*P*' is true because *P*.

Central to the minimalist account of truth is the idea that truth is linked to standards of justification. This approach is not new. One analysis, associated with the pragmatists Charles Peirce (1934) and John Dewey (1938), is that truth is idealised rational acceptability. That is, a statement *S* is true if and only if under epistemically ideal conditions it would be agreed upon by anyone investigating it. This biconditional is supposed to hold for all truth-apt sentences. A closely related proposal was also at one stage defended by Hilary Putnam:

[T]ruth is an idealisation of rational acceptability. We speak as if there were such a thing as epistemically ideal conditions, and we call a statement 'true' if it would be justified under such conditions. 'Epistemically ideal conditions', of course, are like 'frictionless planes': we cannot really attain epistemically ideal conditions, or even be absolutely certain that we have come sufficiently close to them. But frictionless planes cannot really be attained either, and yet talk of frictionless planes has 'cash value' because we can approximate them to a very high degree of approximation. (1981, p. 55)

Putnam makes clear that his intention is not to give a definition of truth but to elucidate the notion. A key point made by Putnam is that truth may be independent of justification *here and now* – that is, what seems to us justified on currently available evidence – but it is not independent of all justification: ‘To claim a statement is true is to claim it could be justified’ (1981, p. 56). In addition to Putnam and Peirce, we have already noted the analysis of truth as warranted assertibility that ties truth to the satisfaction of standards of justification.⁵ In more recent work on truth, Crispin Wright has proposed *superassertibility* as a more satisfactory alternative to warranted assertibility (Wright, 1992). A statement is superassertible if it can be warranted and that warrant would survive any arbitrary improvement of our information.⁶

It may already be clear why minimalism is rejected by the face value approach. In general, what characterises minimalism is that truth is taken to be conveyed on statements that are in principle justifiable: under certain epistemic conditions they satisfy relevant standards of justification. Because truth is tied to justificatory practices, it is *evidentially constrained*; there cannot be truths that outstrip our ability (in principle) to justify them. Truth is also *epistemically constrained* because, for the same reason, all truths must be in principle knowable. Even if we do not actually know whether a sentence is true or do not have (here and now) evidence for its truth, minimalists take its truth to be conceptually linked to our potentially being in a position whereby we are in a position to know that it is true or have sufficient evidence for its truth. In contrast, the face value approach takes truth to be a matter of correspondence to the facts where this is *not* (or does not have to be) epistemically or evidentially constrained: truth is not tied to our practices of justification. There can, according to the face value theory, be unknowable or evidence transcendent truths. I will call the face value conception of truth *robust* in contrast to the minimal conception of truth defended by minimalists.

An important fact about contemporary minimalist analyses, and notably Wright’s, is that no attempt is being made to give a *definition* of truth. A minimalist about one field of discourse is not committed to claiming that truth must be evidentially or epistemically constrained across the board. A minimalist about truth in religion, for instance, can consistently believe that truth in science is more robust. In fact, this is precisely what some minimalists about religious discourse *do* maintain: that truth in religion should be given a minimal analysis in comparison with truth in other descriptive discourses. This brings out a second key point of difference between face value theory and minimalism. Face

value theorists defend a unified account of truth across religious and other descriptive fields of discourse: there is no difference in the analysis of truth in religion and truth in science or history.

It is helpful to think of minimalism as a three-step programme. The first stage begins by setting out the necessary and sufficient conditions – DS principal among them – for the use of a truth predicate in any field of discourse. This is the deflationary strategy. The second stage is to argue that truth satisfies the necessary and sufficient conditions given by the deflationary strategy if it is analysed as warranted assertibility (or some other epistemically and evidentially constrained notion such as super-assertibility, and so on). This is the minimalist strategy. The third stage is to argue that truth in religion is warranted assertibility (or some other epistemically and evidentially constrained notion). This is the strategy of religious minimalism. It is important to distinguish these steps. A supporter of the face value approach could reject the first or second step by arguing either that deflationism provides an unsatisfactory analysis of truth or that, if it does, truth cannot be epistemically or evidentially constrained. Alternatively, a face value theorist might accept the first two steps and reject the third. That is, one could agree with deflationists that the proposed conditions are necessary and sufficient for truth and also that in *some* discourses truth is epistemically and evidentially constrained but argue that this is not the case in *religious* discourse or other descriptive discourses. We explore these different options and their merits in Chapters 10 and 11.

9

Reductionism

Determining whether a purported example of religious reductionism is truth conditional can require some careful unpicking.¹ For example, Euhemerus, a Greek author of works on geography and ancient myths working in the third century BCE, is sometimes identified as the first religious reductionist. Although only fragments of his work survive, classical and early Christian writers attribute to him the view that the gods in the Greek pantheon were based on real, mortal, historical figures revered after their death for their contributions to human society and subsequently elevated to the status of gods. Discussing Euhemerus's views, the fourth century Christian writer Lactantius comments: 'Without doubt, all those who are worshipped as gods were men, and were also the earliest and greatest kings; but who is ignorant that they were invested with divine honours after death, either on account of the virtue by which they had profited the race of men, or that they obtained immortal memory on account of the benefits and inventions by which they had adorned human life?' (1871, p. 22)

One way of developing Euhemerus's theory, which was enthusiastically adopted by many early Christian theologians, is to treat it as an explanation of the origins of the pagan gods and use it as an argument for discouraging belief in them. For example, in a chapter called 'A more credible cause of the rise of pagan error', Augustine writes: 'A far more credible account of these gods is given, when it is said that they were men, and that to each one of them sacred rites and solemnities were instituted, according to his particular genius, manners, actions, circumstances' (1913, VII, ch. 18, p. 281).² This is not truth conditional reductionism. To begin with, Euhemerus is offering an *explanation* of religious beliefs in the pantheon of gods rather than an analysis of the truth conditions of sentences about them. Suppose, for example, that the stories about the

Greek god Uranus originated in an honourable and benevolent king with an interest in astronomy and that after his death he came to be thought of as a god personifying the sky. While this may provide the beginnings of an explanation of ancient beliefs and stories about Uranus, it does not provide the basis for giving reductive truth conditions to, say, (1) or (2).

1. Uranus was castrated by his son Cronus.
2. Uranus imprisoned Gaia's sons in Tartarus.

Explanatory reductionism is consistent with these sentences having the non-reduced truth conditions *Uranus was castrated by his son Cronus* and *Uranus imprisoned Gaia's sons in Tartarus*. Second, truth conditional reductionism identifies a reductive class of sentences by which the truth or falsity of sentences in the disputed class is determined. It is thereby a theory of what makes for the truth of religious sentences (and, in particular, what makes for their truth is something *other* than what those sentences appear to be about) rather than a theory of *which* religious sentences are true and which false. In contrast, Euhemerus's theory and its application by early Christian theologians is aimed squarely at showing that pagan beliefs are systematically false: they are religious fictions inspired by the benevolent deeds of mortal leaders.³

A truth conditional reductionist development of Euhemerus's theory for sentences about the Greek gods would look very different. For example, suppose that the truth conditions of sentences about the gods (the disputed class) are given by sentences about humans who inspired stories about gods (the reduced class). Talk about the gods is interpreted as a way of talking about the people who inspired those beliefs. Moreover, a sentence about the gods is true if the relevant sentences from the reduced class that give it its truth conditions are also true. So, for example, sentence (3) could be interpreted as being true just in case (4).

3. Uranus was powerful.
4. Human-Uranus was powerful.

where human-Uranus is the person who was subsequently deified as Uranus. This is a rather easy example for truth reductionism. Supplying truth conditions in the reduced discourse for sentences like (1) and (2) would require considerably more theoretical development of the reductive story: are there humans corresponding to Gaia and Cronos? Are there real places corresponding to Tartarus? Are 'castrated' and 'imprisoned' to be taken at face value or interpreted in a different way?

This example is, of course, merely illustrative; a reductionist theory of this form is not at all plausible. However, we do not need to get into the details of such an account to see the distinctive features of truth conditional reductionism. Rather than show that sentences about the gods are fictions about impressive historical figures, truth conditional reductionism presents an interpretation of their meaning that aims to free them from invention and from metaphysical extravagance.

Many religious reductionists aim (rather like ethical naturalists) to give an analysis of religious language that makes it compatible with a monistic (materialist) metaphysics or naturalism. The 'supernatural' facts and properties described by theistic religions, such as the existence of a divine being, souls, and an afterlife, are taken to fall outside the range of legitimate facts and properties that are posited in the natural sciences.⁴ For a monist or naturalist wishing to preserve religious discourse or at least to avoid outright atheism, a truth conditional reductionism that reduces sentences about God to sentences about nature as a whole (which would be pantheistic reduction) or to sentences about parts of nature presents interesting options.

An example of the monistic-pantheistic reduction is given by Spinoza (Mason, 2007). One of the most influential defenders of pantheism, Spinoza also suggested ways of interpreting sentences about God in terms of facts about nature. For example, he writes:

By God's direction I mean the fixed and immutable order of Nature, or chain of natural events...the universal laws of Nature according to which all things happen and are determined are nothing but God's eternal decrees, which always involve eternal truth and necessity. So it is the same thing whether we say that all things happen according to Nature's laws or that they are regulated by God's decree and direction. (2002, p. 417)

Since all human actions are, according to Spinoza, the product of the predetermined order of nature, then we can – following the reductive strategy – say that nobody acts except by the will of God. Similarly, since anything that we can achieve is produced by our own actions and/or by external conditions, all such achievements can be understood as the result of divine providence. So, for example, the truth of (5) is given by (6).

5. Nobody acts except by the will of God.
6. All actions are the product of the predetermined order of nature.

Unusually for religious reductionists, Spinoza proposes ways of reducing sentences not just about God but also other matters of religious belief. For example, he comments that 'the choosing of the Jews referred only to the following facts: their temporal material prosperity and freedom – i.e. their political independence' (2002, p. 420) and argues that 'the Holy Spirit itself is nothing other than the peace of mind that results from good actions' (2002, p. 525). Also notable is that Spinoza thought that his proposed reductions provided plausible readings of the intended content of religious utterances, including biblical passages. He writes, 'by God's decrees and volitions, and consequently God's providence, Scripture itself means nothing other than Nature's order' (2002, p. 445); and 'a miracle in Scripture can mean nothing else ... but a natural event which surpasses, or is believed to surpass, human understanding' (2002, p. 448).

Naturalistic interpretations of religious language became popular in the 1920s in both Britain and America. For example, Julian Huxley takes a more sympathetic attitude towards religion than contemporary British rationalists who thought that religious belief and discourse should be entirely abandoned.⁵ He suggests that talk of God could be understood as a way of talking about forces operating in nature or about aspects of nature that we do not understand. He also gives a naturalistic interpretation of other Christian concepts such as the Holy Ghost and the Son of God: 'God the Father is a personification of the forces of non-human Nature; God the Holy Ghost represents all ideals; and God the Son personifies human nature at its highest...and the unity of the three persons as "One God" represents the fact that all these aspects of reality are inextricably connected' (1927, p. 37). Although Huxley rejects the idea that God is a transcendent being, he proposes that God could be thought of as immanent within the world (1931, pp. 182–5). He sees value in religious experience as a way of humans coming to terms psychologically with their place in the cosmos; he even gives a role to acts of worship consistent with his reductive interpretation of religion as they can form part of an appropriately respectful attitude towards nature.

Influential early figures in the American tradition of 'religious naturalism' or 'religious empiricism' are Henry Wieman and Bernard Meland. Through his career Wieman offers a number of ways of interpreting talk of God in naturalistic terms, usually identifying God with natural processes in the universe that yield or facilitate ethically or socially desirable results. For example, he suggests that God is 'that interaction between individuals, groups, and ages which generates and promotes

the greatest possible mutuality of good' (1932, p. 15), or God is 'that interaction which sustains and magnifies personality...the process of progressive integration' (1932, p. 351). He adds that God – conceived of as an 'interaction' – can be the proper object of love and of prayer. 'Can men pray to an interaction? Yes, that is what they always pray to, under any concept of God. Can men love an interaction? Yes, that is what they always love' (1932, p. 17). According to Meland, 'God' refers to natural forces that produce orderly and aesthetically or ethically significant structures in the universe. 'God as a religious concept is a collective representation of certain sustaining relations having cosmic implications' (1976, p. 176).

Also notable is the work of Gordon Kaufman, a leading figure in the development of modern liberal theology. He observes that in many cases the natural phenomena that are integral to giving our lives meaning are deeply mysterious; for instance, that humans are capable of consciousness and thought and can appreciate beauty. He contends that 'God' is the name given to the 'pervasive mystery' that gives life meaning. (2007, p. 12) The claim that God is 'absolute' or 'ineffable', Kaufman contends, expresses the fact that God is a profound mystery. And the claims that God is 'real' or 'exists' should be understood as expressing the belief that underpinning this 'pervasive mystery' are natural forces that promote and facilitate ethical, aesthetic, and social human flourishing. 'Speech about the Christian God as "real" or "existent" expresses symbolically this conviction that free and loving persons-in-community have a substantial metaphysical foundation, that there are cosmic forces working toward this sort of humanization' (1981, p. 49.) Kaufman also addresses the question of why we should continue to talk of God. He points to the value of participating in religious communities and deepening one's awareness of the importance of thought about God in the development of literature, art, and philosophy. He sees talk of God as helping to resist the temptation to make 'idols' out of 'the realities and values found within our world' (1981, p. 15).

Problems with religious reductionism

Does truth conditional reductionism offer a plausible theory of religious language? Despite continuing interest in the theory, the attempts to find a reduction have resulted in interpretations of religious sentences that are highly revisionary. These revisionary consequences, as we shall see, present a serious obstacle to any attempt to produce a plausible reduction of religious language.

To see the revisionary nature of religious reductionism, consider the kind of naturalist reduction proposed by Huxley and others whereby the name 'God' stands for a class of naturalistic processes. The interpretation of some religious sentences will be fairly straightforward. The truth condition for (7), for instance, can be given by (8),

7. God exists.

8. *Such-and-such* natural processes exist.

where *such-and-such* stands for the evolutionary or physical or other natural processes that are described by what the reductionist takes to be the scientifically respectable sentences in the reduced class. Reductionists will thereby be able to endorse (7) and (8). Naturalist reductions also provide a method for interpreting sentences about divine action. For instance, (10) can give the truth condition for (9):

9. God sustains us.

10. *Such-and-such* natural processes sustain us.

Reductionists will be able to agree with (9) and (10). However, many sentences that ascribe properties to God look more troublesome. For example, what truth conditions should the reductionist give (11)?

11. God is omniscient.

Interpreting this as saying that *such-and-such* natural processes are omniscient would presumably render the sentence false. Similarly, many sentences about God's properties that are widely agreed on by religious believers – that God is just, merciful, loving, and so on – will be false on the reductionist interpretation. In addition, reductionists do not usually offer any interpretation of a variety of religious claims not about God, such as 'Jesus is risen' and 'There will be a Last Judgement', which means that the theory provides only a partial account of language employed by most religious believers. Without a reductionist analysis and given their incompatibility with naturalism, reductionists will have to find these religious sentences not about God false. In general, it seems that reductionism will result in error theory for a wide range of religious sentences.

Religious reductionists are, at least sometimes, clear that they are offering an account of what the truth conditions of religious sentences *should* be rather than an analysis of what they are. For example, some

religious reductionists reject the belief that God is a person or is creator of the universe. Notably, while Kaufman sometimes presents his theory as an account of what is meant by talk about God, at other times he presents a much more clearly revisionary proposal. He writes, 'It is this cosmic serendipitous creativity, I suggest, that we *should* today think of as God' (Kaufman, 2007, p. 26; my italics), and he proposes that the 'traditional notion' of God's purposive activity in the word should be *replaced* with 'what I call *trajectories* or *directional movements* that emerge spontaneously in the course of evolutionary and historical developments' (2007, p. 25). Huxley himself seems to have been ambivalent on whether religious discourse should be maintained (to the limited extent that it is a way of talking about natural processes) or instead replaced entirely with discourse about naturalistic phenomena. Current defenders of religious naturalism often avoid any definite reductionist account of religious language in favour of an explicitly revisionary argument that religion needs to change. For example, Stuart Kauffman argues, 'God, a fully natural God, is the very creativity in the universe. It is this view that I hope can be shared across all our religious traditions, embracing those like myself, who do not believe in a Creator God, as well as those who do. This view of God can be a shared religious and spiritual space for us all' (2010, p. 6).

Is the defence of reductionism for a part of religious language plausible? In the last chapter, we saw that reductionists need to defend a reductive interpretation of disputed religious sentences alongside a case for preserving religious discourse rather than eliminate it in favour of the reduced discourse. However, the proposed reductionist interpretations renders a large range of religious sentences false, and their falsity in turn provides a *prima facie* reason not to use them. So take those religious sentences where a reductionist analysis is available and where the analysis does not render the sentence false. Call this the *reducible* class of sentences. Could reductionists defend a limited reductionism for just the reducible class of religious sentences? This strategy looks problematic. Why continue to maintain a reductionist analysis of the reducible class of religious sentences when there are so many other irreducible religious sentences in the disputed class that involve metaphysical error? On the other hand, why not replace religious discourse entirely if only a limited subset of it is not in error? In effect, the two main components of religious reductionism are in conflict: the most sympathetic naturalistic reduction shows that religious discourse needs drastic revision if it is to eliminate metaphysical error (which was, at the outset, the reason for trying to provide a naturalistic interpretation of

it), but widespread error and the need for drastic revision undermines the case for preserving religious discourse

One attempt by a reductionist to defend a partial preservation of religious discourse, rather than replace it entirely with talk of natural processes, is suggested by Kaufman. He argues as follows:

‘God’ is the personifying symbol of that cosmic activity which has created our humanity and continues to press for its full realization. Such a personification has considerable advantages for some purposes over abstract concepts such as ‘cosmic forces’ or ‘foundation for our humanity in the ultimate nature of things’: the symbol ‘God’ is concrete and definite, a sharply defined image, and as such it can readily become the central focus for devotion and service. (1981, p. 50)

However, rather than resolving the difficulty, Kaufman’s response underlines the problem with the reductionist interpretation. Representing aspects of nature as ‘God’, Kaufman argues, provides a more appealing focus for our interests and attitudes than ‘cosmic forces’. But this concedes any pretence of offering an account of the meaning of ‘God’. Kaufman wishes to continue to use the expression not on the basis of a plausible reductionist interpretation of its content but because it provides a psychological aid in supporting and retaining interest in a naturalistic belief system.

Religious reductionism does not therefore provide a satisfactory account of religious language. It is too revisionary to be seen as an account of the content of religious sentences. To continue to use religious language on the basis of a naturalistic reduction of its content pays at best only lip service to the language as it is employed by religious believers; at worst, it raises questions about the integrity of appropriating religious expressions in a potentially misleading way. A more philosophically respectable option for religious reductionists is to call for the elimination of the religious discourse and look to replace it with the reduced discourse. As we saw above with Kauffman, this is a strategy that some contemporary religious naturalists are now pursuing.

Subjectivism

Before leaving the topic of reductionism, subjectivist varieties of the theory deserve attention. Subjectivism follows other reductionisms by giving the truth conditions of religious sentences in terms of

a reduced class of non-religious sentences; it is distinctive by making the reduced class sentences about human psychological states. An early form of subjectivism, albeit one that is not fully worked out as an account of religious language, can be found in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher. He construed our concept and talk of God in terms of a 'feeling of absolute dependence' (1928, p. 17). God, he thought, is not directly experienced in this feeling but is rather implied by the religious experience of dependence. In experiencing this dependence, we thereby have the experience of being dependent on something, even if we do not directly experience the thing on which we depend. The expression 'God', Schleiermacher proposes, designates 'the *Whence* of our receptive and active existence, as implied in this self-consciousness' (1928, p. 16). What we say about God refers back to these experiences of dependence, and at least some of what we say about God should be understood as reporting religious experiences.

Interestingly, for a brief period after his return to philosophy in the late 1920s, Wittgenstein seems to have adopted a subjectivist theory of religious claims, though much of his subsequent work seems closer to minimalism (we turn to this in the following chapter). In 'A Lecture on Ethics', from 1929, Wittgenstein distinguishes two states, a 'wonder at the existence of the world' and 'the experience of feeling absolutely safe'. He then proceeds as follows:

the first of [these experiences] is, I believe, exactly what people were referring to when they said that God had created the world; and the experience of absolute safety has been described by saying that we feel safe in the hands of God. A third experience of the same kind is that of feeling guilty and again this was described by the phrase that God disapproves of our conduct. (1993, p. 42)

Wittgenstein presents us with some surprisingly blunt subjectivist interpretations of some religious sentences:

12. God created the world means *I feel wonder at the existence of the world.*
13. We are safe in the hands of God means *I have a feeling of absolute safety.*
14. God disapproves of our conduct means *I have a feeling of guilt.*

It would seem to follow from this analysis that these religious sentences are true when the speaker experiences the feelings that they report.

Subjectivism not only has the same problems as reductionism; it runs into additional difficulties that make the theory completely untenable for religious language. As shown by the subjectivist analyses in (12) through (14), the content of a religious sentence is given by a sentence with an indexical *I*, which refers to the speaker. The truth of the religious sentence will thereby vary depending on the speaker. If I say 'God created the world' having had the relevant experience of wonder, what I say will be true; if you say it without having had that experience, what you say will not be true. Or modifying one of Wittgenstein's examples, suppose that (15) is true if (16) is true.

15. God disapproves of sloth.

16. I feel guilty when I act slothfully.

It seems to follow that Rachel, who feels guilty about bouts of laziness, will speak truly when she says (15), whereas Jim, who is unrepentantly lazy, will not. The problem with introducing this indexical component into the content of religious sentences is that they become about the *speaker's* feelings. The result is to undermine disagreement between speakers. For example, suppose that Rachel says (15) and Jim says, 'God does not disapprove of sloth.' Rachel will not disagree with Jim because what she says is about her feelings of guilt while what Jim says is about his feelings: both will speak truly, despite saying things that are at face value inconsistent. Moreover, Rachel will not be correct when she says that Jim is wrong, and Jim will not be correct when he says that Rachel is mistaken. Not only can't Rachel disagree with Jim, she can't truly think that Jim is wrong in what he says because, if the subjectivist analysis is correct, what he says is true. This is highly counterintuitive. Religious disagreement seems commonplace and genuine. As subjectivism undermines disagreement between religious believers, the theory is implausible.

10

Minimalism

The source book for religious minimalism is Wittgenstein's work on religion. Many of his comments on the topic seem aimed at bringing to light differences between the use of religious sentences and historical or scientific (and in general empirical and descriptive) sentences. According to the minimalist interpretation of Wittgenstein, his purpose in describing these differences was to elucidate the contrasting internal standards of justification characteristic of these fields of discourse. Wittgenstein, on this account, presents religion as a field of discourse or a language game (or games), distinguished from other areas of language such as science and history by virtue of its distinctive internal standards of justification. In so doing and following from the minimalist account of truth given earlier, Wittgenstein was elucidating the distinctive characteristics of religious *truth* as well as related notions of fact, description, and so on. He was not, according to the minimalist interpretation, seeking to find any disadvantageous comparison between religion and science; to show, for example, that religion is merely expressive of attitudes while science is properly descriptive. Rather, he was describing the different standards that make for truth and descriptiveness in these fields of discourse.

This minimalist reading of Wittgenstein is supported by an attention to differences between the standards of warrant employed in religious and other discourses – the kinds of circumstance in which a religious believer judges something to be true, grounds for disagreements between religious believers and non-believers, and so on – that pervades his own writings on religion. For example, Wittgenstein compares the religious belief in the Last Judgement with scientifically based beliefs and ordinary beliefs about observable states of affairs (he gives the example 'There is a German aeroplane overhead'). While religious believers may speak of 'evidence'

and 'historical events', Wittgenstein argues that the evidence and events cited in connection with a religious belief do not constitute a reason to hold that belief in the way that evidence given in support of a hypothesis gives a reason to believe that the hypothesis is true. In religious discourse 'reasons look entirely different from normal reasons' (1966, p. 56), religious belief is not 'a matter of reasonability' (1966, p. 58), and religious beliefs are not hypotheses or opinions; they are not properly spoken of as objects of knowledge or as having a high probability, and when historical facts are introduced in support of religious belief, 'they are not treated as historical, empirical, propositions' (1966, p. 57). However, Wittgenstein is not inviting an error theory of religious discourse:

It can happen, and often does today, that a person will give up a practice after he has recognized an error on which it was based. But this happens only when calling someone's attention to his error is enough to turn him from his way of behaving. But this is not the case with the religious practices of a people and *therefore* there is *no* question of an error. (1993, p. 121)

Here Wittgenstein seems at pains to emphasise the contrast between religious discourse and fact-stating discourses; indeed, he implies that when taken (or where offered) as reporting scientific facts or scientific theories, religious sentences are in error.

Also in favour of the minimalist interpretation of Wittgenstein is that he was sympathetic to the deflationary strategy:

'p' is true = p

'p' is false = not-p.

And to say that a proposition is whatever can be true or false amounts to saying that we call something a proposition when *in our language* we apply the calculus of truth functions to it. (1953, p. 136)

Since the truth predicate in religious discourse supports the proposed truth schema and may be applied to religious sentences, the applicability of a truth predicate to them can be easily secured. The main philosophical task is then to describe differences in standards of justification between religious discourse and other areas of discourse. Scientific discourse is used not as a model for truth and description against which religious discourse falls short but as an object of comparison against which the distinctive features of truth and description in religious discourse can be articulated.

According to the minimalist reading, Wittgenstein rejects the reductionist and expressivist theories that religious sentences are not descriptive or that they do not represent religious facts: they *are* descriptive and do represent religious facts, but they are not *scientific* descriptions and do not represent scientific facts. Moreover, religious sentences may be true, but the standards according to which they are justified are different from those employed in science. Wittgenstein therefore seems to agree with much of what the face value approach requires but does so 'on the cheap'. Notions of truth, reference, description, and fact do not make weighty philosophical demands on the discourses in which they successfully operate. We can speak of religious truth, reference, and facts, as well as scientific truth, reference, and facts, but must look to the way in which they are used in religious discourse to find out what these terms amount to.

The question of whether Wittgenstein was a minimalist is, of course, quite distinct from whether religious minimalism is a defensible position. However, to get a clearer idea of what the minimalist is arguing, I begin by reviewing some minimalist interpretations of Wittgenstein. Later I address some objections to the minimalist theory that have been raised. In the following chapter I set out in detail why I think religious minimalism fails and religious truth is robust.

Wittgenstein and minimalism

Hilary Putnam is sympathetic to the minimalist interpretation of Wittgenstein. Putnam draws attention to Wittgenstein's well-known remarks on 'family resemblance' concepts. Wittgenstein's target in these remarks is the idea that a concept requires necessary and sufficient conditions for its correct application in different contexts. Intuitively, it seems that there must be such conditions if the meaning of the concept remains the same when it is used in different contexts. Consider the concept *game*, with its varying applications – board games, card games, Olympic games, and so on; we can see, Putnam argues, that for any particular condition that appears to characterise some types of game, there will be others that fail to satisfy it. As Wittgenstein puts it, 'These phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all, – but that they are *related* to one another in many different ways' (1953, p. 65). Rather than common necessary and sufficient condition for all uses of 'game', there is a network of similarities and relationships between them. This shows up in the way the term is normally explained: not by giving a definition but by giving a range of examples.

Putnam points out that Wittgenstein was not primarily concerned just to observe that certain concepts are made up of a network of resemblances rather than satisfying necessary and sufficient conditions for their application, but he also intended to apply this point to notions like *language* and *reference* and *truth*.

It is precisely the big philosophical notions to which Wittgenstein wishes to apply the notion of family resemblance. On Rush Rhees's reading (and I am convinced he is right), what Wittgenstein is telling us is that referring uses don't have an 'essence'; there isn't some one thing which can be called referring. There are overlapping similarities between one sort of referring and the next, that is all. That is why, for example, Wittgenstein is not puzzled, as many philosophers are, about how we can 'refer' to abstract entities. After all, we are not causally attached to the number three, so how can we refer to it? Indeed, do we know that there is such an object at all? For Wittgenstein the fact is that the use of number words is simply a different use from the use of words like *cow*. Stop calling three an 'object' or an 'abstract entity' and look at the way number words are used, is his advice. (1992, pp. 167–8).

Putnam raises the problem here of how we should understand a sentence such as 'There are two prime numbers between 6 and 12'. This sentence appears to refer to abstract entities and gives rise to a problem about the status of abstract entities and how we can know anything about them. His response is suitably minimalist: confusion arises here when we use reference in, say, descriptions of the perceived world as a standard against which to evaluate reference in mathematics. Rather, we should look at the standards of mathematical discourse to understand what reference means in this context. Putnam extends this minimalist conclusion to religion:

The use of religious language is both like and unlike ordinary cases of reference: but to ask whether it is 'really' reference or 'not really' reference is to be in a muddle. There is no essence of reference... In short, Wittgenstein is telling you what *isn't* the way to understand religious language. The way to understand religious language isn't to try to apply some metaphysical classification of possible forms of discourse. (1992, p. 168)

More generally, Putnam's Wittgenstein sees reference as minimally achievable by any assertoric discourse, along with truth, description, and

facts; attention should instead be focused on what reference consists in for religious discourse. This latter issue is taken to be clarified by articulating the internal standards of warrant of religious discourse.

A second example of the minimalist reading of Wittgenstein is presented by D. Z. Phillips.

By all means say that 'God' functions as a referring expression, that 'God' refers to a sort of object, that God's reality is a matter of fact, and so on. *But please remember that, as yet, no conceptual or grammatical clarification has taken place.* We have all the work still to do since we shall now have to show, in this religious context, what speaking of 'reference', 'object', 'existence', and so on amounts to, how it differs, in obvious ways, from other uses of these terms. (1995, p. 138)

Notably, this represents a change of tack for Phillips who (as we saw in Part I) in the early part of his career disputed whether religious sentences are genuinely propositional, referential, or descriptive. Here, he allows that religious sentences are descriptive but opts for a minimal construal of what constitutes descriptiveness as one that is determined by features distinctive of religious discourse.

In general, religious minimalists agree on a number of points. They grant that religious statements have propositional content and may be true, descriptive, factual, and so on. Second, religious truth and related terms are understood as *language game internal* concepts. To know what makes for truth in religion, for instance, we need to look at the internal standards of justification that inform religious discourse. Third, the primary aim of minimalism, at least in the Wittgensteinian form it takes in philosophy of religion, is to elucidate the different standards that characterise different areas of discourse and in particular to spell out the differences between truth in religion and truth in science or history. However, there is also an important area of disagreement between religious minimalists.

I suggested at the end of Chapter 8 that minimalists might argue that truth should be analysed as epistemically constrained in some areas of discourse, such as religion and ethics, consistent with analysing truth in a more robust way in other areas of discourse, such as history and science. Moreover, a face value theory of religious language could be defended consistently with allowing that *some* areas of discourse employ epistemically constrained concepts of truth, provided that truth in religious discourse is robust. But what follows for our broader conception of truth, if truth may vary in this way between discourses? There are two

proposals. One option, embraced by Phillips, is that 'true' *means* something different in different discourses:

Semantic realism is the view that what we mean by 'true' is always the same, whether we are talking of a true account of how many chairs there are in a room, or talking of true love. The view is confused. Unless we recognise different grammars of 'true', we will not be able to understand central Christian beliefs. (1995, p. 149)

Phillips proposes a fragmentary usage of truth, which has the unavoidable upshot that the term is ambiguous. We have multiple truth concepts, with different extensions (1976, p. 142).

Crispin Wright argues, in contrast, that the truth predicate has certain necessary and sufficient conditions for its use, specifically DS and related platitudes (1992, ch. 2); on this, as suggested by the earlier quotation, Wittgenstein seems to concur. Wright argues that we could accept the basic conditions for a truth predicate while allowing that truth may be *differently realised* in different regions of discourse. That is, truth may exhibit features in addition to the necessary and sufficient conditions proposed by the deflationist that distinguish its use in particular discourses. To see what Wright is getting at, consider two discourses where the truth predicate appears to behave differently. For example, for talk about what is funny, the minimalist idea that truth is epistemically constrained looks plausible. We regard sentences about what is funny as truth-apt, but there is little temptation to suppose that there could be unknowable truths about what is funny, because we take truths about what is funny to be essentially tied to considered evaluations and agreement about what is funny. This contrasts with physics, the sentences of which are also truth-apt but where we have no similar inclination to regard truths about, say, the constitution of planets orbiting massively distant stars millions of years in the past as knowable even in principle. The truth of such sentences may outstrip any method available to us to determine their truth. Wright proposes, therefore, that while DS and related platitudes give the necessary and sufficient conditions for truth, truth may further be supplemented differently in different discourses. Truths about what is funny are epistemically constrained, but there are truths in physics that are evidence transcendent. Truth in physics, therefore, should be understood as more robust than truth in discourse about what is funny even though both concepts of truth have the same necessary and sufficient conditions. These examples are, of course, debatable; some may argue that truth in comedic discourse is

robust. Nevertheless, Wright's general proposal about truth admitting variable analyses remains the same.

By way of comparison, Wright suggests the concept of identity. We can think of the concept of identity as grounded in two principles: that everything is self-identical and that identical things share their properties. Together these might constitute the necessary and sufficient conditions for identity. But the way in which the conditions are realised will depend on whether we are dealing with material objects, numbers, people, and so on (Wright, 2003, pp. 78–9). For instance, we may suppose that the identity of physical objects invariably consists in temporal and spatial continuity and that numerical identity is established by the satisfaction of the one-to-one correspondence relation and that personal identity consists in something else, perhaps psychological continuity. Determining whether two people are worshipping the same God would be different again. The different local features of identity depend on the range of objects we are considering, but this is no reason to suppose that we are dealing with different concepts of identity in each case. We have a concept of identity given by certain necessary and sufficient conditions that apply in all cases but constituted by additional conditions depending on the subject matter. Similarly, Wright contends, we have a concept of truth grounded in necessary and sufficient conditions (and specifically DS), but it may be differently constituted by further conditions according to whether we are talking about religious truths, scientific truths, or ethical truths. Wright calls this *pluralism* about truth, and it contrasts with Phillips's fragmentary approach (1992, p. 38).

It is difficult to find anything to favour the fragmentary over the pluralist account of truth. *Prima facie*, the fragmentary approach fails to recognise the distinction between the concept of truth and the variety of contexts in which it is applied. The standards of warrant that inform religious discourse are different to those that inform scientific or historical discourse, but it does not follow from this that the concept of truth does not have necessary and sufficient conditions that apply across these discourses. What *does* follow is that (at least some) historical *truths* will be different to religious *truths* in these discourses because of the different subject matter and procedures we use to determine whether a sentence is true.

There are also serious objections to the fragmentary conception of truth. A problem noted by Timothy Williamson establishes that there has to be a single truth predicate for a language such as English. Consider two discourses, D1 and D2, in English and two statements, A1 and A2, which belong to D1 and D2, respectively. 'A1 or A2' will be a disjunction

in English. It is a platitude about truth that a disjunction is true if either of its disjuncts is true. But if different truth predicates apply in D1 and D2, this platitudinous inference will be invalid, because the claim that a disjunction is true if and only if one of its disjuncts is true will involve an equivocation. A similar problem arises for other platitudes about truth. The rule for conjunction is that 'A1 and A2' is true if and only if A1 is true and A2 is true. But this will hold only if a single concept of truth applies for both D1 and D2. So it must be the case that there is a single truth predicate for both discourses and for all discourses in English unless we are to give up on elementary logical operations.

A natural language is strongly unified in syntax and semantics. Any finite set of its words can be combined together within the unity of a sentence. The notion of truth must respect and reflect this integrity. Truths are many; truth is one. (1994, p. 141)

A similar objection has been raised by Christine Tappolet (1997). Consider an inference involving sentences from two different discourses, such as an inference from the fine-tuning conditions of the universe to the existence of God (physics to religion) or the inference from the existence of God to the existence of human free will (religion to psychology). If the discourses involve different truth predicates, then all such inferences must be invalid because validity requires the preservation of truth from premise to conclusion. So unless we are to give up valid inferential connection between discourses, there must be a truth predicate shared by all statements that appear in such inferences.¹

Pluralism about truth works with minimalism by allowing for local differences in the application of the truth predicate in different discourses while preserving the basic necessary and sufficient conditions for truth. Religious minimalists, therefore, take truth in religion to be evidentially and epistemically constrained but may argue that truth is robust in other areas of discourse. In the following, therefore, I focus on religious minimalism that is pluralist about truth.

Objections to minimalism

a. Wittgenstein was not a minimalist

I will begin by looking at an objection to minimalist interpretations of Wittgenstein raised by Simon Blackburn. Blackburn argues that if Wittgenstein is a minimalist, then far from showing us differences between religious and other discourses, he is in effect establishing their

uniformity by allowing them all to satisfy conditions for truth apt-content, truth, reference, and so on. Blackburn thinks that this is at odds both with what Wittgenstein writes about different areas of discourse and with Wittgenstein's own stated policy, 'I'll teach you differences' – Kent's line from *King Lear*, at one time planned as the motto for *Philosophical Investigations*.

One would expect evidence of Wittgenstein saying, in effect, that he has had us fooled all along. We *thought* he was teaching differences, but he was subverting the very differences he seemed to bring up. All along he was warning us against thinking that it might be significant to try to understand mathematics in terms of rules, or...to wonder if religious commitment or ethics expressed emotional and other cognitive states, and so on. There are no such differences! His motto is: I'll teach you *samenesses*! (1998b, p. 165)

What Wittgenstein is doing in pointing out differences, Blackburn thinks, is to contrast the descriptive with the non-descriptive function of our commitments in different areas of discourse and to expose the superficial similarities in the sentences of, say, ethics and science that mislead us into thinking that they have similar cognitive content. The 'propositional surface' of language conceals a variety of different functions: ethical statements express approval or disapproval, mathematical statements are stipulations, and so on.

This criticism is misplaced. It is true that minimalism is offering a deflationary theory of a range of key concepts such as truth, reference, propositional content, and so on. However, this is only the initial deflationary strategy. There is further work to do in articulating differences between discourses, in particular their distinctive internal standards; truth may in some areas of discourse exhibit more robust properties than those given by the deflationary analysis. Rather than set a high bar for the possession of truth, description, or reference, Wittgenstein (on the minimalist reading) instead attends to the different internal standards according to which statements in ethics, religion, history, and science are judged true.

However, a more serious concern with the minimalist reading is that one *would* expect Wittgenstein to happily admit truth, facts, and reference as entirely unproblematic ways of talking about religious statements. It is to the advantage of religious minimalism that by analysing religious truth in terms of the satisfaction of internal standards of religious discourse, it is innocuous to concede that religious sentences can

be true. Yet Wittgenstein rarely talks in these terms, and whenever he addresses the status of religious belief, he appears to question whether it is a genuine belief at all. This is an approach one would expect from an expressivist. So even though Blackburn's objection to the minimalist reading of Wittgenstein may not be conclusive, Wittgenstein's own writings on religion and on other topics do not definitively lend support to a minimalist interpretation.

b. Minimalism is verificationism

Religious minimalists propose that religious truth is epistemically constrained and that the truth of religious sentences is determined by the standards of justification in religious discourse. Minimalism may therefore appear to be a variety of verificationism in that the minimalist effectively ties the meaning of religious sentences to their conditions of justification (or verification). Is minimalism a latter day logical positivism? (Alston, 1997, ch. 4).

This comparison is highly misleading. As argued in Chapter 4, the verificationist critique of religion set out an apparently tough standard for sentences to possess factual content; namely, that they are empirically verifiable or logically related in various ways to empirically verifiable sentences. Sentences deemed to fall short of this standard, including religious and ethical sentences, were taken to be literally meaningless. The minimalist is proposing nothing of the kind. Minimalism sets very modest requirements on the sentences of a discourse for them to have truth-apt or propositional content: they need satisfy only DS. Moreover, the minimalist is prepared to accept the standards of justification that are operative within the discourse in question as suitable for analysing truth in that discourse even if they would not be accepted in science. No special status is accorded to empirical verification. As far as the minimalist is concerned, the agreed judgement of a select group of the faithful and reference to a sacred text or a papal decision can serve just as well as standards for (different regions of) religious discourse as planetary investigation, observations from peering through a telescope, and the extraction of data by computer analysis do in astronomy.

One respect in which minimalism does resemble the verificationist position is in offering an epistemically and evidentially constrained account of truth. The minimalist analysis of truth has the upshot that true statements are in principle knowable and cannot outstrip our ability to establish their truth. The logical positivist takes the empirical verifiability of a statement as a condition of factual content. This position is committed, therefore, to a similarly epistemically constrained

conception of truth. This point of similarity, however, presents no assistance to the critic of minimalism, for the argument against logical positivism primarily concerns its problematic formulation rather than the conception of truth that it implies.

c. Minimalism and fideism

A well-known argument against religious minimalism, as well as the most cited objection to Wittgenstein, is that his account of religion has the effect of quarantining religious discourse from other areas of discourse, in particular science and history. The approach is seen as leading to fideism, where religious beliefs are compartmentalised and unsusceptible to intellectual evaluation, specifically empirical or historical evaluation. The objection is forcefully prosecuted by Kai Nielsen.

Within many of our language-games, when we are operating with them, and reasoning and reflecting inside their parameters, reasons, justifications, explanations often can be given and often are perfectly in place. What, however, Wittgenstein does stoutly argue for, and Malcolm and Winch follow him here, is that the giving of reasons, justifications and explanations comes to an end...at the existence of the language-games and the associated forms of life. (2000, p. 146)

As a result, 'no philosophical or other kind of reasonable criticism or for that matter defence is possible for forms of life or, indeed, of any form of life, including Hinduism, Christianity, and the like' (2000, p. 147).

However, while the charge of fideism may be appropriately directed against some Wittgensteinians, it is not a fair objection against a properly thought through minimalism (or, on this reading, Wittgenstein himself). For there is nothing about looking at or describing the internal standards of religious discourse or contrasting the different standards exhibited by different discourses that precludes the possibility that scientifically or historically well-founded evidence informs religious judgement. If minimalists are to keep to the standard of describing rather than revising religious discourse, then they must take account of the fact that historical evidence clearly *is* weighed in a variety of religious beliefs, including belief in Christ's resurrection or the creation of the world and beliefs about miracle workers and what they have done; any proposed description of religious discourse would be seriously remiss in not acknowledging this. Insofar as this happens, the verdicts of historical or scientific investigation are capable of modifying religious judgements. By comparison, suppose we make the ethical judgment that

James should be punished for bullying John. This judgement is defensible only if it is the case that James bullied John, which is a matter that can be independently investigated. The justifiability of the ethical evaluation is thereby dependent on an empirically assessable fact. In a similar way, many religious judgements are dependent on historically or scientifically assessable evidence. For example, compelling evidence that the documentary and eyewitness testimony for a miracle was a hoax would be a good reason not to believe that the miracle in question occurred, and this evidence comes from 'outside' the religious language game. Minimalists can allow that empirical evidence is required for and informs many religious beliefs while maintaining the theory that religious discourse employs distinct standards of justification in reaching religious judgements.

d. Truth is not epistemically constrained

There has been a growing recognition in the philosophy of religion of the importance of epistemically and evidentially constrained notions of truth in understanding the Wittgensteinian position and its opposition to face value interpretations of religious language. This has been highlighted in particular by William Alston (1995; 1996). One line of response, however, has been to attempt to show that *all* epistemically constrained notions of truth are untenable. A recent case in point is an argument advanced by Christopher Insole against a version of Putnam and Pierce's theory that analyses truth in terms of what is 'ideally justified'.

The flaw in this conception of truth can be stated very simply... 'p is ideally justified' can either be taken in a weak sense, as 'p has the property of being justified for some cognitive agent of more-or-less human limitations', or in a strong sense, 'p has the property of having whatever ideal justification it takes to guarantee the truth of p – for instance, it is justified for an omniscient being to believe that p'. In the former case the epistemic conception of truth is not at all plausible. In the latter case, it is plausible, but only because we have defined ideal epistemic conditions in terms of 'whatever it takes to arrive at *truth*', where what is *true* is understood in a realist 'relating to a transcendent state of affairs' sense. (2006, p. 63)

Insole appears to intend this argument to apply to any epistemically constrained account of truth. If every epistemically constrained analysis of truth fails, the antirealist analysis of religious truth fails as well, yielding a knockout blow to religious minimalism.

However, Insole's argument puts little pressure on the minimalist position. Clearly, truth does not admit a successful analysis in terms of what we are able, here and now, to justify. No clearly thinking proponent of an epistemically constrained conception of truth is suggesting this: the information available to us may change, and the techniques we have for evaluating it may improve. In an investigation of the murder of Tony, the fingerprints on the weapon and the testimony of the witnesses may justify the conclusion that the culprit was Gordon. But additional evidence, such as new witnesses, or different types of evidence, such as forensic investigation, may justify a different conclusion. This is the point of analysing truth as *idealised* justification rather than merely justification. Insole asserts that the only alternative is to accept an epistemically unconstrained notion of truth. But it is not at all clear why he thinks this. Why shouldn't truth be idealised justification, warranted assertibility, or superassertibility? A statement is superassertible if it is warranted and would remain warranted under arbitrarily close scrutiny or improvement in our information. This analysis ties truth to our standards of appraisal, as minimalism requires. It also clearly accommodates the possibility that new evidence and new techniques may result in a change in our opinions. There is nothing in Insole's argument to suggest that superassertibility is incoherent or self-defeating; similar points could be made for warranted assertibility or idealised justification.

A line of argument similar to Insole's is offered by Peter Byrne:

There may be observations to be made about the world which we cannot make, and never will make, which would show one of our cherished theories to be false in part or in whole. It is conceivable that there are beings with greater intellectual powers than ours capable of formulating theories to fit the facts we know but which explain those facts better. Such theories would be stronger candidates for truth. We know that in the past cherished theories have been rebutted by later observations or by the emergence of more cogent rivals. Even if a theory never receives such a rebuttal, it is conceivable that it will. Only if 'ideal' in 'epistemically ideal' actually means 'correspondence true' can epistemically ideal theories be guaranteed truth. (2003, p. 79)

Byrne's points are:

1. We can imagine that we have overlooked and will continue to overlook empirical evidence that will bear on the truth of some of our theories.

2. We can imagine a superior being who can formulate theories that are more likely to be true than the ones we have.
3. It is conceivable that 'cherished theories' will be shown false by new evidence or by new rival theories.

However, none of these points pose any difficulty for an epistemically constrained theory of truth; moreover, it is not clear why Byrne thinks they lend any support to a 'correspondence' theory of truth. Clearly, (1) to (3) are all true. But they are also true if truth is epistemically constrained. This can be seen by substituting 'truth' with an evidentially constrained notion. Suppose we replace it with 'superassertible'.

4. We can imagine that we have overlooked and will continue to overlook empirical evidence that will bear on the superassertibility of some of our theories.
5. We can imagine a superior being who can formulate theories that are more likely to be superassertible than the ones that we have.
6. It is conceivable that 'cherished theories' will be shown not to be superassertible by new evidence or by new rival theories.

All the reasons that Byrne cites for thinking that a theory might fail to be true are reasons for thinking that it might fail to be superassertible. Why, indeed, would anybody reject (4), (5), or (6)? Someone who did so would think that they were *infallible* on the truth of the theory in question. But to claim that we can be infallibly right on some theory is distinct from and does not follow from the claim that truth is conceptually tied to standards of warrant.

Far from raising an obstacle to minimalist theories of truth, Byrne effectively plays into their hands. For all the reasons that Byrne gives for supposing that we might not have secured the truth – missing evidence, lack of cognitive power, unknown future developments – are *epistemic* reasons. What the religious realist needs to establish, in contrast, is that truth in religious discourse is robust. I set out some ways of showing this in the following chapter.

11

Truth in Religion

Religious minimalists believe that religious truth and related concepts of facts, descriptions, and so on, are epistemically and evidentially constrained notions analysed by the internal standards of justification of religious discourse. The face value theorist, in contrast, claims religious truth and related concepts of facts, descriptions, and so on, are robust. The objection to minimalism that truth *cannot* be analysed as an epistemically and evidentially constrained notion is, I argued in the preceding chapter, not a promising line of argument for the face value theorist. Rather than object to the contention that truth in *some* discourse could be just warranted assertibility (or some other evidentially and epistemically constrained notion), face value theorists should focus instead focus on whether truth in *religion* is more than warranted assertibility. This is a more conservative and certainly more achievable strategy. Provided that a case can be made for the robustness of religious truth, face value theorists do not need to embark on a project of showing that pluralism about truth and minimalism for all discourses is indefensible.

So does truth in religion exhibit properties that show that the truth of religious claims depends on a religious reality and is not merely determined by the internal standards of religious discourse? Crispin Wright helpfully characterises the issue between minimalist and robust conceptions of truth as follows:

if the realist wins...we shall be forced to think of the truth of [the discourse's] statements as conferred by functions other than those which determine proper practice within the discourse, and hence as being, in whatever sense is thereby imposed, not of our making but a matter of a substantial relationship between language, or thought, and independent states of affairs. (1992, p. 78)

But how can we show that truth in religion is robust? The difficulty is that minimalists have at their disposal deflationary interpretations of the many of ways in which we might suppose that religious truth is more than minimal. For example, suppose we point out that 'God' *refers* (or aims to refer) to God or that religious sentences *describe* religious facts. We saw in the preceding chapter the strategy that the minimalist can deploy. That 'God' is referring expression is cheaply secured by the fact that it is used as a referring expression: its syntactic role is akin to that of a name. 'God' successfully refers when it occurs in statements that are true, where truth is understood minimally. Similarly, a religious statement may be descriptive if it can be evaluated as true or false by the internal standards of religious discourse. Even the idea that religious truth *corresponds* with religious reality can be given an interpretation compatible with minimalism: saying that a sentence corresponds with reality is just a gloss on saying that a religious sentence is true. Supporters of the face value approach may complain that minimalists are deviously reinterpreting the key philosophical concepts. However, this response underlines that face value theorists need to articulate a notion of correspondence, truth, and reference that cannot be captured by the minimalist analysis. Asserting that religious truth is a matter of correspondence with reality is mere hand waving unless we can give content to the idea that distinguishes it from the minimal account of correspondence while also remaining consistent with a plausible interpretation of what speakers mean when they use religious language.

There are, I think, two main areas where substantive debate between the face value approach and minimalism can be pursued. In each we will find that religious truth is more robust than can be allowed for on the minimalist strategy.¹

Explanation

One reason for dissatisfaction with the minimalist's analysis of truth, reference, and description is that these concepts should point to a substantial relationship between an expression and the object it refers to or a sentence and the fact that it describes. On the minimalist account, no real work seems to be done by the religious entities or facts that are being referred to or described. Rather, reference and description are accorded to a class of sentences and utterances that satisfy certain syntactic standards and also satisfy standards of justification. But it seems that a religious sentence is true not merely because it satisfies

certain syntactic and internal standards of the discourse but because it represents – and perhaps is causally related to – the mind-independent state of affairs that it describes. The minimalist seems to offer only ersatz notions of truth and reference, where religious facts seem merely to mirror justified moves made within a religious language game, rather than constitute an extralinguistic reality.

One way of making progress with this debate is to identify explanations to which religious facts or properties might contribute, explanations we would not expect were religious discourse only minimally truth-apt. A way of measuring the explanatory contribution of religious facts or properties to different discourses is suggested by Crispin Wright. He defines the contribution made by the facts or properties posited in a discourse towards explaining things *other than* beliefs about those facts as its *cosmological role*. The *width* of its cosmological role is a measure of the extent of the contribution that facts or properties described by a discourse make to such explanations; that is, their role in explaining anything other than the beliefs we have about those facts. For example, a property such as the *squareness* of a table has a wide cosmological role. It explains why I see the table as square, why the table can fit alongside other variously shaped tables to form a certain pattern, why I might cut myself falling over it, why it will break in a certain way if struck at a certain point, and so on. Squareness, therefore, enjoys an explanatory role in psychology, biology, mathematics, and other discourses. Funniness, in contrast, is a property with narrow cosmological role. We have beliefs about what is funny that we might explain by things being funny; for instance, we might explain the widely held view that *Monty Python* is funny and *Police Academy V* is not by saying that the former is funny and the latter is not. But funniness has no role in explaining non-comedic facts. Why is a wide cosmological role important? The minimalist proposes that truths about the subject matter of the disputed discourse are determined by what is justified by the standards internal to that discourse. So, in general, we would not expect that we are licensed to use descriptions of properties and facts in the disputed discourse in wider contexts, such as explanations of a distinct subject described in a different discourse. The discovery, therefore, that a property has a wide cosmological role is a reason to suppose that the minimal construal of the discourse to which it belongs is mistaken.

It may at first appear that this test is ineffective because it can be used to show that the properties posited by almost any disputed discourse have a cosmologically wide role. Even funniness appears to have an

explanatory use in other discourses, such as 'he laughed because it was funny'; in this case the property seems to explain a behavioural reaction. However, while I do not want to preclude the possibility of a non-minimal interpretation of comedic discourse, this is not a convincing counterexample to the narrowness of the cosmological role of funniness. 'He laughed because it was funny' does not posit a property of funniness that caused a psychological/behavioural reaction but can be understood as 'he laughed because he found it funny'. It is his belief that it is funny that causes the reaction. In general, explanations of people's comic sensibilities and their subsequent reactions can be given without positing a class of comedic properties with a wide cosmological role. Width of cosmological role, therefore, requires not just the use of a predicate in explanations in a variety of discourses but the corresponding property doing genuine explanatory work.

Is the cosmological role of religious facts or properties wide? That is, do religious facts or properties contribute to the explanation of non-religious beliefs? If they are, then what is true about those religious facts or properties is not wholly determined by the internal standards of religious discourse, and the minimalist account of religious truth is inadequate. A wide cosmological role enforces a distinction between religious truth and justification according to the internal standards of religious discourse.

Notably, although not presented in terms of width of cosmological role, discussion about the cosmological role of religious facts is very familiar in philosophy of religion. Take, for example, the debate about the nature of miracles. A miracle is apparently an example of a religious property – a divine action – explaining a physically observable event. On the face value approach to what is meant by saying that a miracle has occurred, the divine action constitutes part of the explanation of the physical event. As such, miracles are cosmologically wide.² Moreover, if divine action figures in a complete account of the event, truths about divine action must extend beyond the minimal notion of truth conferred on them by the satisfaction of internal standards of religious discourse. Consequently, truth about divine action cannot be minimal. Since talk about divine action pervades religious discourse, truth in religion cannot be minimal either. An account of miracles by supporters of minimalism, in contrast, might construe talk of miracles as a way of thinking about an event with particular religious significance. But this analysis pointedly allows that there will be a physical explanation of the event that does *not* rely on reference to divine action (Tillich, 1989). A remark by Wittgenstein illustrates:

If one wants to understand as Dostoevsky did the miracles of Christ such as the miracle at the wedding of Cana, one must consider them as symbols. The transformation of water into wine is astounding at best & we would gaze in amazement at the one who could do it, but no more. ... It must be the marvellous that gives this action content & meaning. And by that I don't mean the extraordinary or the unprecedented but the spirit in which it is done and for which the transformation of water into wine is only a symbol (as it were) a gesture. (2003, p. 91)

If a miracle is just an extraordinary or symbolic event of religious significance, the cosmological role of talk about divine action remains narrow and consistent with a minimal reading of religious truth.

Is there a usage of religious predicates in explanations for which no plausible minimalist reading is available? Consider explanations for the existence of the universe and for certain features of it. For example, where God's activity is posited to account for the fine-tuning conditions or physical states of affairs for which a scientific explanation is not available, God's action explains non-religious states of affairs and our beliefs about them. Such explanations are certainly controversial and have met with various objections. For example, it may be argued that we have inadequate grounds for supposing that an omnipotent and benevolent deity designed the world in preference to some other religious hypothesis, such as a numerous gods responsible for different features of the world. Another widely canvassed objection is that there are many features of the world that a theistic hypothesis does not adequately explain, such as the existence of evil. However, these are arguments against the truth of the religious explanation; they do not challenge the suitability of religious properties to play an explanatory role in accounting for physical properties of the universe or the existence of the universe. As such, religion-physics explanations provide evidence for the width of cosmological role of religious discourse. If divine action forms part of a cogent explanation of a physical event, then truths about divine action are not wholly determined by the internal standards of religious discourse, and therefore religious truth is not minimal.

A minimalist response would need to show that religion-physics explanations do not really rely on positing any religious facts or properties. One option would be to construe explanations positing divine action in a similar way to 'He laughed because it was funny'. The minimalist might be able to make some headway with examples like 'He was healed by the power of God' and 'She did it because God told her to', which

could be interpreted as saying 'He was healed because he believed that God healed him' and 'She did it because she believed that God told her to', respectively. The minimalist could provide a similar account of other religion-psychology and religion-behaviour explanations to defend the position that they do not posit religious properties with a wide cosmological role. But it is difficult to see how the strategy can be extended to the religion-physics explanations that we are considering. To interpret a sentence like 'The world exists because God created it' as not positing the existence of a divine creator does not do justice to what the speaker intends. The problem for minimalism is unsurprising since the religion-physics explanations emerge not only from religious considerations but also from lacunas in current scientific theory. It is precisely because we lack an entirely satisfactory physical account for fine-tuning, the laws of nature, the existence of the universe, and so on, that religious properties have been posited to explain them. We cannot therefore bypass reference to religious properties by a minimalist gloss on religion-physics explanations.

Could the minimalist argue that the religion-physics explanations are mistaken and therefore do not provide evidence of a wide cosmological role for religious facts? This argument is misplaced. I have been arguing that (at least some) religious facts and properties have a wide cosmological role because they are the kind of facts and properties that are suitable to feature in explanations for certain physical facts about the universe. To show that religious facts and properties have a wide cosmological role, we do not need to show that the fine-tuning or design arguments are actually successful, only that there are cogent religion-physics explanations which posit religious facts and properties. To prosecute the case effectively, therefore, minimalists need to establish that these are not genuine explanations.

The width of the cosmological role of religious facts and properties presents one respect in which religious truth must be more than minimal. If religious properties and facts can enter into explanations in non-religious fields of discourse, then religious truths are not determined by just the satisfaction of standards internal to religious discourse.

Evidence transcendence

As we have noted, when we are considering an area of discourse such as talk about what is funny, the kind of evidentially and epistemically constrained account of truth proposed by minimalists seems well motivated: it isn't plausible to posit truths about what is funny that are

beyond our ability (even in principle) to establish.³ Insofar as we allow that there are truths about what is funny, they seem to fall firmly within what is knowable. The case is also arguable, though considerably more controversial, for ethics and aesthetics. But is it plausible for religious discourse? Religious believers posit facts that lie beyond what we can know even in principle. Moreover, it is an integral part of many religions that there are limitations on what religious truths humans have access to. An obvious class of cases consists of statements about God's actions and thoughts. Such statements, religious believers usually maintain, are determinately true or false according to whether God does actually think or act in the way described. Human knowledge of them is strictly limited to what God reveals about them. Truths that God has not revealed may entirely outstrip human capacities to determine even in principle. In these respects, therefore, it seems implausible to maintain that religious truth is epistemically or evidentially constrained.

That religious truth is epistemically unconstrained can also be brought out by considering divine command theories and related theories that aim to ground ethical truths in divine judgement. For example, R. M. Adams argues that moral obligations are constituted by the commands of a loving God such that an action is morally obligatory if a loving God commands it and an action is morally wrong if it is contrary to a divine command (Adams, 2002, ch. 11). Notably, this theory is reductionist about the class of obligation claims because the truth or falsity of sentences about what we are obliged to do is determined by the truth or falsity of sentences about God's commands (the latter being the reduced class of sentences). Other divine 'command' theories underpin ethical claims in God's will, motivations (Zagzebski, 2004), or preferences (Carson, 2000) and have been extended beyond moral obligations to give a comprehensive account of ethics. What is particularly interesting about divine command theories for the current discussion is that they have the upshot of conferring on ethical truth the more robust and epistemically unconstrained character of religious truth. Sentences about God's commands, will, or motivations appear to be determinately true or false independently of the evidence we have for their truth or falsity. If God's will, motivation, or preference determines ethical truths and is not communicated to human beings, there will be unknowable ethical truths. Divine command theory imposes a more robust conception of truth in ethics than is admissible by minimalists. This indicates that truth in religious discourse is relatively robust.

The potential inaccessibility of God's motives and preferences is sometimes given as a reason to prefer divine command theory where God's

judgement is made explicit, since it seems undesirable that we should be under concealed and unknowable obligations. However, even if the command is communicated, the method of communication may fail to guarantee that the moral requirement is knowable. If the command is conveyed by revelation, information about it may have become irretrievably lost because, for example, the revelation occurred far in the past and the relevant sources are insufficiently reliable. If the command is set down in scripture, it may no longer be possible to reach an unambiguous interpretation of what was intended. However, it is important to note that the *actual* inaccessibility of God's commands is not pivotal to the question of whether ethical truth is more-than-minimal given a divine command theory. Suppose that God has arranged the world so that information about his commands is in all cases in principle available to us. It follows that ethical truths would be epistemically and evidentially accessible: we would always be in a position where we could in principle determine whether a given ethical sentence is true or false. Even so, it does not follow that ethical truth would be an epistemically or evidentially constrained concept. One reason for this is that while warranted assertibility in ethics and ethical truth could be coextensive, they could conceivably diverge: God *could* have made it that certain ethical truths are inaccessible to us. So there could be ethical truths that are in principle not accessible. Second, divine command theory places a clear order of priority between justification in ethics and ethical truth. A statement is warrantably assertible in ethics *because* it is true. That is, the fact that the statement is true explains why it is justified because we are able only in principle to correctly judge that an ethical claim is true by virtue of the fact that God has communicated something about his will, commands, or motivations.

This final point about the order of priority in the relationship between truth and warranted assertibility can be seen more clearly in a complementary way of approaching the issue proposed by Crispin Wright. Consider the well-known contrast set out in Plato's *Euthyphro* between (1) and (2).

1. It is because certain acts are pious that they are loved by the gods.
2. It is because they are loved by the gods that certain acts are pious.

The debate is between Socrates, who accepts the first but rejects the second claim, and Euthyphro, who accepts the second and rejects the first. Since both parties accept that an act is pious if and only if it is loved by the gods, the class of acts that are pious and those acts which

are loved by the gods are the same. But there is a difference in the order of priority that they place on the relationship between pious acts and those that the gods love. On the first view, priority is given to piety: it is because the gods are able infallibly to detect piety and always appropriately respond to it that pious acts are loved by the gods. On the second view, priority is given to the estimation of human acts by the gods: piety is not a property independent of divine judgement that is tracked by the gods; rather, it is the judgment of the gods that determines whether or not an act is pious.

The structure of this Euthyphro question is isomorphic with the problem of the relationship between truth and warranted assertibility in discourses where they are coextensive. According to the face value approach

3. It is because certain sentences (in the discourse in question) are true that they are warrantably assertible.

Whereas the minimalist believes

4. It is because they are warrantably assertible that certain sentences (in the discourse in question) are true.

Consider the case described above in which ethical truths are determined by divine commands and God has arranged the world so that all ethical truths (and thus all relevant truths about his commands) are in principle available to human beings. It would follow that the conclusions yielded by the best application of the relevant standards will coincide with ethical truths. But clearly the face value conception of ethical truth is preferable to the minimalist's; for in the case described, it is only because we are fortunate enough that God has arranged the world in our epistemological favour that ethical truths are knowable.

Returning to religious discourse, it can be seen first that the cosmological role of religious facts and properties is further widened by the explanatory relationship that they can have with ethical beliefs. One does not have to support a divine command theory or one of its alternatives to see that divine properties – in this case God's will, commands, or motivations – can be employed to explain why certain ethical statements are true. This strengthens the objection to minimalism in the preceding section. Second, since there are religious truths that are evidence transcendent, the Euthyphro contrast does not need to come into play in making the case for robust religious truth. But even if truth

were coextensive with warranted assertibility in religious discourse, this would not avail the minimalist, because there *could* be unknowable religious truths even if there happened not to be any. In addition to a wide cosmological role, therefore, evidence transcendence presents a second respect in which the minimalist account of truth is unacceptable.

Conclusion

Whereas in Part I, I argued that there were persuasive reasons to modify the face value theory of religious language to make way for a non-cognitive component, there are no compelling reasons for thinking that the face value theory of religious truth is either mistaken or incomplete. The Wittgensteinian tradition of analysing religious truth and related concepts in terms of the standards of justification internal to religious discourse is unable to account for either the possibility of evidence transcendent religious truth or the explanatory role of religious facts and properties.

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Part III

Religious Discourse

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12

Introduction

Suppose that we agree with a face value interpretation of religious language and also with a face value account of truth in religious language and discourse. So religious sentences represent religious facts, and their truth is understood robustly as depending on those facts. There remains a further question of how we should understand the *use* of religious sentences. The semantic or propositional content of a sentence and its truth conditions is one thing, the information that a sentence is used to communicate is another. A face value approach to religious discourse will of course allow that there are many cases where the utterance of a sentence does not communicate its propositional content. The occurrence of such utterances is obvious. For example the following three utterances employ metaphors that are not normally intended by speakers or understood by hearers to communicate their strict literal content.

1. God is love.
2. The Lord is my shepherd.
3. I am the way, the truth, and the life.

The face value approach will also need to accommodate cases of irony, exaggeration, fiction, and other non-literal speech, where the propositional content of what is said is not the same as what is communicated. In these respects, religious discourse is like other areas of (descriptive) discourse where speakers can engage in non-literal talk.

However, matters become more interesting and contentious when we are concerned with utterances that appear to be clearly literal. Take the following examples:

4. God created the world.
5. The authors of the Bible were inspired by the Holy Spirit.
6. God is omnipotent.

We can imagine contexts in which these utterances would be meant non-literally; (5) could be said jokingly by a religious sceptic, for example, with the aim of communicating the idea that the authors were *not* divinely inspired. However, in the absence of a context in which a non-literal utterance would be appropriate, we would expect at face value (4) to (6) to be literal assertions that, if sincerely stated by a religious believer, express the speaker's belief in the asserted propositions. This face value interpretation of religious discourse is disputed by *hermeneutic fictionalists*, who argue that religious utterances do not literally assert their propositional content. I introduce the background to this debate and then explain the fictionalist position in more detail.

Analogy and metaphor

The two main kinds of non-literal discourse that have been seen as particularly important in religion are analogy and metaphor. Analogy relates to the use of expressions that occur in both religious and non-religious contexts. Take, for example, the expressions 'good', 'wise', and 'powerful' when used in ordinary contexts to talk about people. Do these expressions have the same meaning when used to talk about God, or are they used analogously: is the 'standard' meaning they have when used to talk about mundane objects in some way modified when used to talk about God? Discussion of religious analogy was particularly lively in early medieval theology, and Aquinas was a leading proponent of an analogical treatment of religious predicates.¹ Interest in analogy was revived in the mid-20th century with philosophers of religion such as Ian Ramsey (1957) and I. M. Crombie, although their focus was less on the meaning of analogical expressions and more on the psychological contexts and processes involved in grasping the meaning of analogical expressions. Richard Swinburne has provided a detailed analysis of analogy that we consider in comparison with metaphor in Chapter 13. In recent years, research has focused more on religious metaphors. The importance of metaphor has long been noted by theologians, with Sally McFague (1983) offering the most extensive treatment, while in the philosophy of religion William Alston (1989, chs. 1, 2), Janet Soskice (1985), Anthony Kenny (2005) and Richard Swinburne (1991b, ch. 3; 1993, chs. 4, 5) have all contributed to the discussion.

What is the relationship between religious analogy and metaphor? I have presented them as two kinds of non-literal usage of language when speaking of God (or other religious matters), where what is communicated is standardly intended and understood to diverge from what is said. On this approach, the information that is being communicated is not settled by the conventional meanings of the words that the speaker uses – as seems to be the case with (4) to (6) – but needs to be worked out from contextual information. Analogy and metaphor are products of how we *use* language in particular contexts. Suppose somebody says:

7. God is my rock.

To work out what the speaker is communicating, we need to know or make assumptions about the context of utterance, including the speaker's intentions, to work out in what respects God is or is not being claimed to be like a rock. On this basis both analogy and metaphor can be seen as variations on the same linguistic process that is triggered when we interpret utterances that put words together in ways that suggest that they are being used unconventionally. The difference between them is a matter of degree. For example, if (1) is taken to use an analogical use of 'love', the meaning of the analogical usage will have much in common with the literal use of 'love'. In contrast, the meaning of 'rock' in (7) requires a more substantial change to its literal content. The standard meaning of 'rock' as a solid mineral substance forming part of the earth is entirely stripped away from the communicated content; instead, the speaker intends to convey the idea that God provides a spiritual and emotional foundation.

There is, however, a different way of thinking about religious analogy according to which analogy is not a matter of the *use* of words with conventional meanings; rather, words used to describe God have secondary analogical meanings that supplement their mundane meanings. The expression 'good', for example, might be taken as having two related but distinct established meanings, one of which is usually used in talking about God and the other when talking about people, actions, and non-religious matters. If this were right, then 'good' and other analogical expressions used of God are ambiguous because they each have (at least) two meanings. Moreover, analogical talk of God would be *literal*, and the discussion of analogy and perhaps metaphor as well would be best placed in an earlier part of this book rather than considered as part of an investigation into religious discourse. But this approach to analogy leads to a number of problems. If we are to say that the word 'good' has

a religious and a non-religious sense, why not expand the number to encompass all of the distinctions we make in the use of the expression? The goodness of God may be different to the goodness of people, but it is also different, for example, to the goodness of a social policy, of an exam answer, of a football match, and so on. There would, it seems, be no end to the proliferation of different meanings the word has. This gives rise to the problem of how words like 'good', 'wise', and 'powerful' could be learnt by speakers if they have such a large number of different meanings associated with them. The problem does not arise, however, if these expressions have a single conventional meaning that speakers and hearers can use in combination with information about the context in which they are used to work out what the utterance *implies*.

Construing analogy as a characteristic of religious discourse rather than language has the additional advantage of addressing a different problem. It seems that the sense of an analogical expression in religion should be parasitic on its standard, non-analogical sense. In contrast, there is no reason to suppose that the different senses of an expression should have any relation to each other beyond the historical fact that the same word has come to mean two different things. The word 'bank', for instance, has two senses – a financial institution that invests money, the land sloping down to a river or lake – that are not connected in their meaning beyond their attachment to the same word. But it seems that the meaning of 'wise' or 'good' when describing God and in general when employing an expression analogically in religion should be closely related to its mundane meaning. If analogy is a distinct sense of an expression, there does not seem to be a good explanation available for this close relationship. If, however, analogy is the product of combining information about the mundane sense of an expression with information about its context, the connection between the analogical and mundane sense is preserved.

The theory that metaphor should be interpreted as an implied meaning communicated by the speaker, which is perhaps the most prominent of current theories of metaphor, is explored along with alternatives in a review in Chapter 13. But why should metaphor be a matter of special interest in *religious* language? Metaphors are also commonplace in aesthetics and in literary, comedic, and political talk, and they are also often found in the expression of scientific theories. So should questions about *religious* metaphor – what they mean, how they differ from literal utterances, whether they can be literally paraphrased, and so on – be subsumed under questions about metaphor in general raised in the philosophy of language? To some extent this is correct, in that

we should not expect that an account of what a religious metaphor is should diverge from an account of metaphors with a different subject matter. However, a number of philosophers of religion and theologians have suggested that there are no literal truths about God and the only true sentences about God are *irreducibly metaphorical*. This theory (or something like it) is often voiced or referred to, particularly in theological discussions of religious language, and Tillich's (1989) suggestion that religious language is symbolic is perhaps an early expression of the view, but it is rare to find the position given a precise formulation.² Notably, William Alston, the chief critic of the theory, has set out its most cogent formulation. According to Alston (1989, pp. 17–19) the irreducibility theory (IT) states:

Religious metaphors are the only way of stating truths about God, and the content of a metaphorical utterance about God cannot be stated, even in part, in literal terms.

The upshot of IT is that any literal assertion that God has a certain property will be false. But Alston sees the supporter of IT as construing apparently literal claims about God, such as (4), (5), and (6), as metaphorical. We look at philosophical and theological statements of IT by Anthony Kenny and Sally McFague in the following chapter and see that they adopt an even stronger theory than IT: that *all* talk of God is irreducibly metaphorical, irrespective of whether it is true or false. We also consider Alston's objections to IT and develop a novel objection against the theory based on the difficulty in finding a theory of metaphor on which IT can be given a cogent formulation.

Fictionalism

IT can be understood as a variety of *hermeneutic fictionalism*. Hermeneutic fictionalists about religion take religious sentences at face value but argue that, in uttering these sentences, speakers do not assert the truth of the propositional content of the uttered sentence. Some fictionalists put this differently, by saying that speakers engage in a distinct act of *quasi-assertion*. A quasi assertion is a speech act that has the appearance of an assertion – it is the utterance of an indicative religious sentence – but it does not assert the expressed proposition.

The details of quasi-assertion depend on the kind of fictionalism being proposed, and a variety of options have been proposed.³ Sometimes quasi-assertion involves the assertion of something other than the

propositional content of the uttered sentence. For example, a fictionalist about mathematics might argue that a mathematical sentence *M* is used to assert that *M* is true *according to standard mathematics*.⁴ Alternatively, to quasi-assert a sentence might be to *pretend* to assert it. We can see that this latter kind of fictionalism about the utterances of actors when performing is quite plausible. When Humphrey Bogart says, 'I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship', it seems reasonable to take him to be pretending that what he is saying is true rather than asserting its truth (we do not take him to be deceitful if what he says is false). Quasi-assertion is sometimes taken by fictionalists to be non-cognitive. For example, Kalderon (2005) proposes that while moral sentences express propositions about moral facts (thereby rejecting ethical expressivism), we do not assert these propositions when we utter them. Instead, we express certain non-cognitive affective states. This raises the question of what mental states are being expressed by speakers when they make quasi-assertions since, on these examples of fictionalism, speakers do not appear to *believe* what they are saying. The mental state expressed by quasi-assertion is sometimes called *acceptance*. Acceptance may be belief but not usually belief in the propositional content of the quasi-assertion; rather, it might be the belief that what is said is true according to a fiction or according to some set of presuppositions (that the speaker is not committed to). In other cases, such as Kalderon's fictionalism, acceptance is a non-cognitive attitude.

Returning to IT, we can see that it is a form of hermeneutic fictionalism. Its defenders propose that apparent assertions about God are really quasi-assertions: they are metaphorical utterances that do not express belief in what is literally said. In Chapter 14, I look at three other varieties of hermeneutic fictionalism. The first of these, the 'praise' theory of religious discourse, picks up on an interpretation of apophatic theology put forward by Jean-Luc Marion that was sketched out in Chapter 2. The second develops a theory by Georges Rey that educated religious people are systematically self-deceived about their apparent religious beliefs. I argue that both of these fictionalist theories face insurmountable objections. However, I conclude with a novel version of hermeneutic fictionalism, *modest fictionalism*, that I think is successful. According to modest fictionalism, religious claims fall short of norms that constitute assertion and as such are quasi-assertions; nevertheless, religious quasi-assertions are typically expressions of religious belief. As we will see, modest fictionalism offers a purely pyrrhic victory for the fictionalist: while the theory technically classifies as a form of fictionalism, it does not substantially diverge from the face value theory.

As with many of the theories that we have been considering in this book, fictionalism comes in revisionary and non-revisionary versions. Hermeneutic fictionalism, which we have been considering is the non-revisionary version; the revisionary form is called *revolutionary fictionalism*. For example, the Sea of Faith Network, inspired by the work of Don Cupitt, noted in Chapter 1, can be understood as revolutionary fictionalism because it promotes Christian practice and the continuing engagement with religious discourse without religious belief. Robin LePoidevin, drawing on work by Cupitt, also defends a position akin to revolutionary fictionalism although he suggests that religious claims might be modelled on an instrumentalist account of theories ‘as non-descriptive, and consequently neither true nor false’ (1996, p. 108), which sounds more like a radical form of attitude theory. Recently, Peter Lipton (2007) proposed that one can engage in religion as one might immerse oneself in a fiction. Revolutionary fictionalism is motivated by the wish to continue to receive the social and other benefits of engagement with a religion without commitment to its truth. Interesting though they are, I will not be investigating these theories further because they are not really saying anything about the meaning of religious utterances; instead, they recommend that we change religious discourse to quasi-assert utterances rather than assert them.

13

Metaphor and Analogy

Later sections assess the irreducibility thesis (IT) about religious metaphor, but before that we need to consider what a metaphor is. I review four main theories (two of which, John Searle's implicature theory and Max Black's interaction theory, are closely connected). As we will see in the later evaluation of IT, one of the most serious objections to the theory is that there does not seem to be a plausible theory of metaphor available on which IT can be defended.

Theories of metaphor

A useful way into recent debate about metaphor is the simple and elegant theory proposed by Donald Davidson. On Davidson's account 'a metaphor doesn't say anything beyond its literal meaning (nor does its maker say anything, in using the metaphor, beyond the literal)' (2001b, p. 246). Davidson denies that metaphors mean *anything* distinct from their literal meanings. So what a metaphor says – that God is our father, that Juliet is the sun, that love is a rose, and so on – is what it literally says. Moreover, since what a metaphor says is usually patently false (or, more rarely, trivially true as in the examples 'A revolution is no tea party', 'No man is an island'), metaphorical utterances are thereby usually patently false. However, Davidson is not proposing that metaphorical language is just a way of making obviously false claims. 'Joke or dream or metaphor can, like a picture or a bump on the head, make us appreciate some fact – but not by standing for, or expressing, the fact.' (1978, p. 262) Although metaphorical utterances do not have a special metaphorical meaning that distinguishes them from literal utterances, a metaphor presents hearers with an image or picture. To take a religious

example, in the use of 'God is our father', the image presented is of God having the role of a father to us. While this picture may prompt us to have further ideas – that God protects us, cares for us, and so on – Davidson's point is that these ideas do not form part of the meaning of the speaker's utterance. All that is communicated is the (false) claim that God is our father. So in general, while metaphors may cause further ideas in those who encounter them, these ideas are not part of their meaning. The impact of a metaphor on its audience is not determined by its content but is more like a primitive causal phenomenon.

The distinctive idea in Davidson's theory that a metaphor is like a picture is helpfully developed by Samuel Guttenplan (2005). He takes Davidson to be arguing that a metaphor 'is something like putting a photograph before us; it prompts us to have various thoughts and to form various beliefs, but none of these depend essentially on recognising [the speaker's] intentions' (2005, p. 13). Guttenplan draws on an example from Grice that makes a distinction between two ways in which a person *X* might induce in person *Y* the belief that *Y*'s partner had been unfaithful. One way is for *X* to show *Y* a photograph of *Y*'s partner entwined with someone else; a second way is for *X* to sketch *Y*'s partner so entwined. While either the photo or the drawing might cause *Y* to think that his or her partner had been unfaithful, only in the latter case, Grice contends, does *X* tell *Y* that *Y*'s partner is unfaithful, because only in this case does *Y* rely on an appreciation of *X*'s intentions. *Y* depends on an understanding of what *X* intends in order to infer who the sketched figure represents, to know that the sketch is meant seriously and is not just a joke in bad taste, and so on. In contrast, *Y*'s interpretation of the photograph does not depend on an understanding of what *X* intends or even that *X* has any role in revealing the photograph. Both the sketch and the photograph are types of picture, but it is a picture of the latter kind, Guttenplan suggests, that Davidson brings into play in his account of metaphor. That is, a metaphor functions like a picture by inducing various beliefs which do not rely on an appreciation of the intentions of the speaker. How do we know when an utterance should be taken as presenting a picture, rather than being merely false (or trivially true)? Davidson's answer is that it is precisely the obviousness of the falsity (or evident truth) of the sentence that shows that the speaker does not believe the assertion and that the sentence is being used metaphorically.

For all the advantages of its simplicity, however, Davidson's theory is unsatisfactory. To begin with, the comparison between metaphors and jokes seems misplaced. Joking, which Davidson sees as similar to the

use of a metaphor, does not involve a distinctive linguistic operation on the constituent expressions involved in the joke. Davidson may be right that its impact on an audience should be understood causally, albeit the causal process is more complicated than the suggested example of a bump on the head. But the meaning of a metaphor does seem to have to do with the content of the metaphorical utterance. For example, one can misunderstand a metaphor. If someone who took the claim 'God is our father' to mean that God is angry, they would have misunderstood it. Misunderstanding seems to be a matter of failing to grasp the meaning of the utterance. Also, one can agree with a metaphorical utterance or disagree, dispute, or contradict it. In general, our evaluation of the truth of a metaphor and the correctness of our interpretation of it seem to be, at least in part, constrained by what the metaphor means. Davidson's theory seems unable to do justice to this evidence.

Given the problems with Davidson's account, a theory that takes the meaning of a metaphor to be related to its content may seem appealing. However, we cannot understand a metaphor from just the propositional content of the metaphorical utterance because it is, as we have noted, trivially false or trivially true. According to the influential interaction theory of Max Black, further analysis is needed to extract the metaphor's meaning. Specifically, this analysis needs to take into account the 'interaction' between the component expressions of the metaphor. In the utterance 'man is wolf', for example, the predicate 'wolf' is taken to bring with it a collection of associated ideas in the minds of speaker and hearers that are then 'filtered' by various features of the subject 'man': 'The wolf metaphor suppresses some details, emphasizes others – in short *organizes* our view of man' (Black 1962, p. 41). The effect of this filtering is to give a new sense to the predicate. By its interaction with our ideas of 'man', the predicate 'wolf' takes on a secondary meaning that is non-standard and non-literal.

One difficulty with the interaction theory concerns the proposed relationship between the literal meanings of sentences and the metaphorical meanings that are generated by interactions. On the interaction theory, a given predicate can be paired in metaphors with different subjects and take on any number of non-standard meanings. But if the component expressions of metaphors can interact to generate a variety of novel metaphorical meanings, how can we explain the apparent dependence of a metaphor's meaning on its literal meaning? For instance, we need to know the literal meaning of 'father' to understand the metaphor 'God is our father', and in general an understanding of the literal meaning of the predicate expression in a metaphor seems requisite to grasp the

metaphor's meaning. In this respect, metaphors contrast with idioms, where knowing the literal meaning of the terms making up the idiom are usually of little assistance in working out what it means. Knowing the meanings of 'red' and 'herring', for example, does not help to understand 'red herring'; one can know the meanings of the latter without the former. But we do not grasp the meaning of the metaphor 'Juliet is the sun' without an understanding of the literal meaning of 'sun'. The proposal that the predicate expression in a metaphor takes on a distinct non-literal meaning does not seem well positioned to explain the apparent reliance of a metaphor's meaning on the literal sense of its component expressions.

An alternative suggestion is that metaphor should be understood as a kind of indirect speech given by what a metaphor suggests or implies. A standard approach here uses the Gricean theory of conversational implicature. Metaphorical sentences are usually distinguished by being plainly false and thereby flout a conversational maxim that one should not say what one believes to be false. The breaking of the conversational rule indicates to hearers that the speaker is not following conventional linguistic practice and intends to communicate something other than what is said. To work out what this is, we should look at the context in which the metaphor is asserted. John Searle argues

In order to understand the metaphorical utterance, the hearer requires something more than his knowledge of the language.... He must have some other principles, or some other factual information, or some combination of principles and factual information that enables him to figure out that when the speaker says, 'S is P', he means 'S is R'. (1993, p. 89)

Searle's theory of metaphor is comparable to a Gricean account of irony. Someone who says 'That was charming', having just been insulted, does not intend what is literally said. Anyone taking the claim non-ironically would miss out on what was meant. Attuned to the conventions of irony, we recognise that the sentence should not be taken at face value. The speaker is communicating just the opposite of what is said, that the experience was unpleasant and the person delivering the insult was not charming. In a similar way, once we are in command of the conventions governing metaphorical utterances, we can interpret 'Juliet is the sun' as communicating something other than what is literally said: Juliet has a range of properties, one example of which might be 'essential to my life'.¹

This implied meaning account seems to get certain things right. Unlike Davidson's theory, it allows that there are standards of correctness for our understanding the meaning of a metaphor. Unlike Black's theory, it makes clear the relationship between our grasping the literal meaning of the sentence and the implied metaphorical meaning that we subsequently recognise when context is taken into account. However, the theory is not without problems. A leading difficulty is that the theory explains only a limited range of examples. Essential to the Gricean model is that the interpretation of a metaphor is a two-step process. We begin by understanding an initial content, which is what the metaphor literally says, determine that it is patently true or false, and work out what the metaphor really means from additional information about linguistic practices and the context of utterance. The problem arises when we are dealing with sentences with a more complex form than Searle's 'S is P'. For example, neither (1), said by Mohammed Ali of Joe Frazier (White, 1986, p. 205), nor (2) seems to be trivially true or false.

1. They ought to donate his face to the wildlife fund.
2. Out of the crooked timber from which men are made, nothing straight can ever be built.

It is not clear what would have to obtain for these sentences to be true or to be false; they do not seem to be saying anything literal at all. But if these utterances cannot be taken literally, then Searle's model of metaphor, which requires a distinction between what the metaphor literally says and what the metaphor implies, breaks down.

A further problem can be raised for Searle's account of metaphor. As we have seen, the theory proposes that understanding a metaphor is a two-step process of grasping the literal meaning and then extracting the metaphorical meaning. However, this approach does not seem to capture what goes on when one understands a metaphorical sentence. Suppose someone says

3. The ATM swallowed my credit card, chewed it up, and spat it out.

In understanding this utterance, we do not seem to go through a process of determining the literal meaning of the sentence (which in this case is not very clear) and then inferring the secondary metaphorical meaning. Rather, we unreflectively grasp how 'swallowed', 'chewed up', and 'spat out' should be understood in this context.

I conclude this review of theories of metaphor by setting out the contextualist position. Although they differ from one another on important details, the leading advocates of contextualism include Recanati (2001, 2004), Sperber and Wilson (1986a, 1986b), and Carston (2002). Central to the contextualist theory of metaphor is an account of the kind of information that a metaphor typically communicates. To explain this view, I begin with some background on the information that contextualists take to be conveyed by concepts, define some technical terms, and then introduce the key notion of loose talk.

Atomic concepts can be seen as making available three types of information. First, there is logical content that consists in the inference rules and analytical implications of the concept. Second, there is encyclopaedic or general information, which involves commonplace assumptions, culturally held beliefs, experiences, observations, and so on. Third, there are lexical properties that are the phonetic, phonological, and syntactic characteristics of the linguistic form (typically a word) that encodes the concept (Carston, 2002, p. 321). For example, the concept CAT has a logical content that includes inferential rules, such as that a cat is a kind of animal, and encyclopaedic information about cats – what they are like, their anatomy, behaviour, appearance, and so on; it also has various grammatical and phonetic characteristics which for an English speaker characterise the word ‘cat’. Note that not all concepts need have all three components: OR, for example, seems to lack an encyclopaedic entry. A key notion in the contextualist theory is that of an *ad hoc concept*, and this should be understood as follows. An *ad hoc concept* is one that is modified in the course of understanding a sentence to which it belongs in response to the context of that sentence. That is, by using a lexically coded concept – one for which we have a word – in a certain context, one can communicate a *different* concept that shares some logical and encyclopaedic information with the encoded concept. This latter concept is *ad hoc* because it is generated on the fly in response to various cues given in the context.²

Suppose a speaker wants to communicate a set of propositions P1, P2, ..., Pn, all of which are either logically derivable from sentence Q or are implied by Q with plausible assumptions about the context of Q's utterance. However, the speaker does not believe that Q is literally true. If the speaker's audience is in a position to identify the implications P1, P2, ..., Pn that the speaker wants to convey, the most efficient and informative strategy for the speaker may be to assert Q, even though Q is, if taken in a strictly literal way, inaccurate. In such a case, someone may choose to assert Q as a less than literal, or loose, way of expressing

P1, P2, ..., P_n. This phenomenon is called *loose talk* (Sperber & Wilson, 1986b). Suppose, for example, a speaker who lives just outside the city limits of Paris says 'I live in Paris', enabling the hearer to infer a large amount of true and relevant information from the utterance: that the speaker spends time in the Paris area, has an urban lifestyle, knows Paris, and so on. Using the expression 'in Paris' loosely may be the most efficient way of communicating these other relevant facts. Loose talk of this kind is relatively common. Other examples include:

4. The dish is raw (when it's not fully cooked).
5. The house was silent (when there is minor background noise).
6. The lawn is square (when one side is slightly longer than the other).

Loose talk can be understood as the result of a process of loosening or 'sense extension' (Carston, 2002; Recanati, 2001): we take the predicate expressed by the loose claim and broaden its extension according to the context. For example, knowing the linguistic meaning of 'square' and knowing about lawns, the hearer is able to adjust its content in a way that is appropriate to the context. This consists in relaxing some of the rules of the encoded concept SQUARE. The logical information in this concept includes all four sides being exactly the same length and the internal angle at each corner being 90 degrees. These rules are modified to be suitable for a context in which we are talking about the shapes of lawns. In this context, it is enough for a lawn to *look* square or *be approximately* square to count as being square. According to contextualists, we use context in a spontaneous process of concept modification to yield, in this case, an ad hoc concept SQUARE*. Loose talk occurs 'whenever a condition of application packed into the concept literally expressed by a predicate is contextually dropped' (Recanati, 2004, p. 26). With the concept suitably modified, the sentence can also convey a distinct range of implications. So, to take another example, utterance (4), asserted in the context of a complaint about a meal in a restaurant, conveys that the dish is insufficiently cooked, that it is inedible, that it should be replaced with a better done meal, and so on. The utterance does not mean that the dish is literally raw.

How does loose talk help in a theory of metaphor? The contextualist proposal is that metaphor *is* loose talk but taken to a looser degree than the examples we have considered. Take utterance (3). Knowing the meaning of 'swallow', 'chewed', and 'spat' and knowing what ATM machines sometimes do, we are able to adjust by loosening the concepts

SWALLOW, CHEWED, and SPAT to the situation talked about. Now, this may seem to lead to the following problem. 'Juliet is the sun' strikes us as metaphorical, whereas (4), (5) and (6) and other cases of loose talk given above appear to be literal. If metaphors are just a kind of loose talk, what explains the intuitively figurative character of metaphor? According to Recanati, 'In sense extension, those dimensions of meaning that stand in conflict to the specifications of the target are filtered out, but they remain somewhat active and may generate a feeling of discrepancy.... That feeling, and the discrepancy that underlies it, comes in degrees.... Beyond a certain threshold, cases of sense extension will therefore count as special.' (Recanati, 2001, p. 272) Metaphor, on this view, is simply loose talk generated by loosening (or 'sense extension'), where the degree of departure from the literal use of the expression is particularly striking.

The contextualist theory of metaphor avoids some of the problems with Searle's account because metaphorical meaning is not a secondary meaning of a literal sentence. Rather, someone encountering a metaphor sorts through the information encoded in the predicate expressions and filters out those that are not appropriate in the context and in so doing loosens the relevant concepts. The metaphor can be grasped without going through a two-step process of interpretation. The theory can also meet or is not susceptible to the other objections raised against the theories of metaphor that we have considered. For example, a problem cited with the interaction theory was that it does not have an explanation for why the meaning of a metaphor, as opposed to an idiom, seems dependent on the literal meaning of its component expressions. On the contextualist thesis, it is much clearer why this should be the case. We have a number of lexically encoded concepts that are modified in the course of understanding a metaphor through a process of loosening using contextual information.

The contextualist theory of metaphor remains a highly contentious matter. Various problematic examples of metaphors have been proposed that the theory has difficulty in explaining (Wilson & Carston, 2006; Recanati, 2007). However, debate has most actively focused on whether the contextualist interpretation of utterances is defensible. Exploring this issue would take us beyond the aims of this chapter, but for a recent review of the debate, see Szabo (2005).

This completes the review of the leading current theories of metaphor. However, before moving on to IT, I would like to draw attention to a way in which the contextualist theory can be used to shed light on the relationship between metaphor and analogy. Consider Richard

Swinburne's account of religious analogy (1993, ch. 4). Swinburne takes the analogical use of a term to be constituted by a modification in its syntactic and/or semantic rules. A syntactic rule for the use of a term *p* sets down general conditions governing its use. A verbal definition such as 'bachelor is an unmarried man' and a non-definitional principle for the use of a word such as 'if *q* involves supposing that *q*' are examples of syntactic rules. A semantic rule for *p* gives examples of the things to which *p* correctly applies or does not correctly apply. Giving a semantic rule for *red* would involve pointing to various red objects and contrasting them with objects that are not red. In general, Swinburne believes, a semantic rule for a predicate provides a range of standard examples and requires that the predicate be used to pick out properties that resemble those standard examples in the respect in which they resemble each other and as much they resemble each other (1993, p. 58).

Swinburne proposes that the analogical use of a word involves the loosening up of its semantic and syntactic rules. Regarding the semantic rules, Swinburne suggests that the analogical use of a predicate *W* is correctly applied to a property that resembles the standard examples of *W* objects 'in the respect in which they resemble each other either as much as they resemble each other or more than it resembles standard examples of other objects which are non-*W*' (1993, p. 59). That is, a less strict degree of resemblance to standard examples of *W* is required for an object to fall under the analogical predicate *W*^{*}. This loosening of the semantic rule will likely enforce modifications to the syntactic rules. Suppose that it is a syntactic rule that *Ws* are *Xs*, and that *Xs* are either *Ys* or not-*Zs*, where *Y* and *Z* are defined (in part) by standard examples. Unless *Y* and *Z* are themselves used analogically, it may be that the broader class of examples to which *W*^{*} can legitimately be used to refer results in this semantic rule being weakened or dropped. For instance, Swinburne believes that the concept 'person', which in its ordinary sense has living human beings with physical bodies as its standard examples, must be used analogically with a suitable weakening of its semantic rules and modification of its syntactic rules when applied to God.

Swinburne diverges from contextualist theory in the emphasis he places on the degree of resemblance to standard examples as the basis for the correct use of a predicate. However, his analysis of analogy ties in with the contextualist theory of metaphor by making a specific type of conceptual loosening the device by which analogies are generated. Consider the kind of loosening that goes on in interpreting (6). The

modified concept SQUARE* includes not just objects that are square but also objects (like lawns) that are nearly or approximately square. The condition that squares should be exactly square is stripped out of the information content of the concept by loosening. Let's call a loosening where the modified concept includes all of the denotations of the pre-loosened concept a *pure loosening*. The modification of SQUARE is a pure loosening, because while some squares* are not square, all squares are square*. Note that RAW* in the example above is a pure loosening, and it can be seen that SILENT would also undergo a pure loosening in (5). Now, Swinburne's theory of analogy in effect construes analogy as pure loosening. For example, in his account of the analogical use of 'person', the concept is loosened to allow in a larger range of cases (in particular, persons without bodies) without excluding objects that previously counted as persons.

Turning to metaphor, the loosening involved in metaphorical interpretation tend not to be pure but to involve a change that results in the extension of the loosened concept overlapping with but not including all of the denotations of the pre-loosened concept. Let's call these operations *radical loosening*s. Take the utterance

7. The Lord is my shepherd.

This metaphor communicates the thought that the Lord looks after me (the speaker). The ad hoc concept SHEPHERD* expresses the quality of caring while filtering other elements in the content of SHEPHERD, such as the tending of sheep. This conceptual modification is not, however, a pure loosening because while God and other suitably caring individuals are shepherds*, not all shepherds are shepherds*. A shepherd with the responsibility of caring for a flock of sheep who did so ineptly and uncaringly would not be a shepherd* to those sheep. The modification of the concept is thereby a radical loosening.

Now I am not suggesting that Swinburne would be sympathetic to contextualism. However, an appealing feature of the contextualist theory is to show how a plausible account of religious analogy emerges from the same process of loosening that occurs when we interpret a religious metaphor. Whereas analogical uses of words can be seen as the result of a pure loosening, metaphors commonly rely on a radical loosening (a modification of the content of a concept that also tends to be more noticeable to hearers and speakers). Contextualist theory thereby offers a way of unifying the long standing discussion about religious analogy with the more recent examination of metaphor.

The irreducibility thesis: McFague

At first glance, McFague seems an ideal representative of the irreducibility thesis. She thinks not only that religious metaphors are irreducible but that metaphorical sentences are pervasive in religious discourse (and other discourses). However, as will become apparent, McFague is working with an eccentric concept of metaphor that renders her thesis disappointingly uncontentious.

McFague introduces her account of metaphor as follows.

[A] metaphor is seeing one thing as something else, pretending 'this' is 'that' because we do not know how to think or talk about 'this', so we use 'that' as a way of saying something about it. Thinking metaphorically means spotting a thread of similarity between two dissimilar objects, events, or whatever, one of which is better known than the other, and using the better-known one as a way of speaking about the lesser known. (McFague, 1982, p. 15)

As suggested by this paragraph and elsewhere in her book, McFague takes 'metaphor' to include a number of things: metaphorical sentences, the grasping of a metaphor, the construction of a metaphors, and the thoughts that might be prompted by hearing a metaphor. There are also some puzzling features in McFague's analysis. It is not clear why either the subject or the predicate of a metaphor should be 'better known' than the other or why pretence need be involved at any stage in using a metaphor. I do not, for example, need to pretend that the ATM has swallowed my credit card to understand (3) or to think about the ATM in these terms. However, it is clear that McFague takes recognition of a similarity between the subject and predicate expressions in a metaphor as a necessary condition for grasping a metaphor and presumably takes positing a similarity as an essential component of asserting a metaphor.

McFague also proposes, however, that positing or detecting similarities is *sufficient* for stating or grasping a metaphor or for metaphorical thinking. Consider, for example, the following selection of claims:

[M]etaphorical thinking constitutes the basis of human thought and language. From the time we are infants we construct our world through metaphor; that is, just as young children learn the meaning of the color red by finding the thread of similarity through many dissimilar objects (red ball, red apple, red cheeks), so we constantly

ask when we do not know how to think about something, 'What is it like?' (McFague, 1982, pp. 15–16)

[C]onceptual or abstract language is metaphorical in the sense that the ability to generalize depends on seeing similarity within dissimilarity; a concept is an abstraction of the similar from a sea of dissimilars. (McFague, 1982, p. 16)

Even as simple a statement as 'this is a chair' means only that I have made a judgment that I will think about this object *as* a chair because there is sufficient similarity between this object and other objects which I have called 'chairs' in the past that I believe my assertion is justified. The example... illustrates metaphorical thinking at its most common, continuous, and instantaneous level. (McFague, 1982, pp. 16–17)

What McFague seems to be calling metaphor or metaphorical thinking in these cases relates to what John Locke and other early empiricists called *abstraction*, a topic that we touched on in the discussion of Berkeley, which is the formation of ideas of properties that are common to collections of things (Locke, 1975, book III). Locke considered abstraction requisite for abstract thought and to our ability to use and understand predicate expressions. This reading of McFague is confirmed by her treatment of mathematics. 'Seeing the similar number among otherwise disparate entities is a metaphorical act, as in six apples, six moons, six ideas, six generous acts' (1982, p. 34). If we think of metaphor as a type of speech act, then this comment looks perplexing; merely grasping or expressing an abstract concept seems distinct from a metaphorical utterance. In contrast, if 'metaphor' is taken to mean the same as 'abstraction' (and abstract thinking or any use of abstract concepts are 'metaphorical acts'), then McFague's point is straightforward. It is just that number concepts are universals and require abstraction for us to frame them in thought or language.

If the irreducibility thesis were about abstraction rather than metaphor, it would raise a distinct set of questions. Abstract concepts are pervasive in our thinking, as are general terms in language, and some sentences involving general terms could not be replaced by sentences involving particular ones – most obviously in cases where a general term has an infinite extension. But to argue this point is in effect to change the subject away from metaphor to abstraction and abstract concepts. What McFague is calling metaphor has no greater bearing on what we standardly take to be metaphorical than it does on any other part of speech. Despite appearances, therefore, McFague's discussion of metaphor does not lend any support to IT.

The irreducibility thesis: Kenny

Kenny is concerned with the seeming impossibility of saying anything true about God if God is ineffable. He defines ineffability as 'The doctrine that, in some sense, it is quite impossible to speak about God; that God is not something to be captured by human language' (2005, p. 11). His starting point is therefore sympathetic with the apophatic theologians. Kenny's views about how we should understand this doctrine and its implications for religious language can be summarised in three main points.

First, if God is ineffable – or 'inconceivable', as Kenny sometimes puts it – then it may appear self-refuting to talk about him at all, even if only to state that God is ineffable. However, 'the solution to the paradox of God, if there is to be one, must be found by insisting that while we can speak of God, we cannot speak of him literally.' (2005, p. 16) That is, by using religious metaphors, we can speak of God even though God is ineffable. Kenny later suggests that we conceive of ineffability as requiring only that we cannot speak of God literally. '[W]hile we can speak of God, we cannot speak of him literally. God, if that is so, will be literally ineffable, but metaphorically describable.' (2005, p. 35)

Second, Kenny defines metaphor as 'in the standard case, taking a word which has a role in one language-game and moving it to another' (2005, p. 17), and in general a metaphor involves using a word in a 'language game' in which it does not belong. 'Language game' is not defined. Moreover, Kenny thinks that the term 'God' does not belong in any language game; he denies, for example, that there is a religious language game.

To say that we cannot speak literally of God is to say – to use the currently fashionable philosophical jargon – that the word 'God' does not belong in a language-game. Literal truth is truth within a language-game. Some philosophers believe that there is a special religious language-game, and it is in that game that the concept of God is located. I believe, on the contrary, that there is no religious language-game, and that we speak of God in metaphor. And to use metaphor is to use a word in a language-game which is not its home. (2005, p. 16)

Since the term 'God' does not 'have a home' in any language game, Kenny argues, its use will always involve the use of a term in a language game in which it does not belong. Consequently, all talk of God is metaphorical.

Third, Kenny recognises that there are cases of dead metaphor, which he describes as follows. Whereas in using a metaphor there is a 'movement' of a term from language game A, which is the context in which it is normally used, to the unusual context of language game B, when a metaphor is dead, the term in question is no longer out of place in B and has become literal. But Kenny contends that this cannot happen for the term 'God'. 'My claim is that theological metaphor is irreducible. It can never become a dead metaphor, and it can never be replaced by literal language' (2005, p. 40).

It is notable that Kenny takes the position that all talk of God is irreducibly metaphorical. This is a stronger theory than Alston's IT, although IT does follow from it: if all talk of God is irreducibly metaphorical, then so are claims about God that are true. Also, although Kenny presents his view as the upshot of the belief that God is ineffable, it is the peculiar status of the concept of God as not 'belonging' to any 'language game' that seems to be doing the main work in motivating Kenny's irreducibility thesis. Consequently, Kenny's version of IT is non-revisionary: he is not suggesting that we prefer metaphorical talk of God over literal talk or that we change religious language in any way. Rather, by virtue of the way in which the expression 'God' functions as a linguistic item, any claim about God is automatically metaphorical.

Kenny's account of metaphor and its role in religious language is sketchy and, even on a charitable interpretation, highly problematic. Take, for example, Kenny's undefined notion of 'language game' and his contention that there cannot be a religious 'language game' (that is, a 'language game' that standardly involves the concept 'God'). If a 'language game' is like a field of discourse, in the way in which this idea has been discussed in this book it aims merely to pick out a class of utterances that interest us. Discourses are often characterised by a range of distinct expressions or subject matters and various associated practices and standards of warrant employed by those who use the discourse. But clearly there can be various religious discourses: we can just consider utterances that refer to God or utterances that refer to a wider range of religious phenomena. Since Kenny insists that there is no religious 'language game', he presumably does not take a 'language game' to be a field of discourse. Nor is Kenny using 'language game' in the way it is found in Wittgenstein. According to Wittgenstein, such practices as naming things, repeating words after someone, telling jokes, describing an object, giving orders, and so on, may count as language games (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 23). But singing a hymn of praise to God and innumerable other religious linguistic practices, including describing

and attributing predicates to God, could also count as 'language games' in this sense. So what exactly Kenny takes a 'language game' to be is mysterious.

Kenny does elaborate further on his claim that metaphor involves taking a word with a role in one language game and moving it to another.

In the case of God it is taking a word which has no role in any standard language-game and using it in other games. Where names are used in ordinary language-games either the input to the game (experience) or the output (behaviour) involves contact with the object named. With God it is not so; we have no experience of God, and we cannot affect him in any way. (2005, pp. 40–1)

This is a surprising turn on a seemingly Wittgensteinian analysis, since it appears to make it a requirement for an 'ordinary language game' either that its constituent referring terms refer to objects in our experience or that we can affect the objects that they name. To begin with, the condition seems indefensible. On the same basis, talk of numbers or other abstract objects cannot be part of any 'ordinary language game'; nor could one ordinarily talk of objects in the distant past, objects that are inaccessibly far away, in parallel universes, and so on. But secondly, why believe that we do not experience God or that we cannot affect God? Human behaviour affects what God knows, and divine action in the world and communication with human beings are possible cases of humans coming into contact with God.³ Perhaps Kenny would dispute that these are genuine cases of interaction, but he neither offers nor cites a defence of this position.

Further difficulties appear with Kenny's account of metaphor. Even putting aside the unclarity of the notion – itself metaphorical – of a word 'having a home' in a language game, the idea that a metaphor consists in shifting a word from one linguistic context to another has some obvious counterexamples. Many similes and idioms will count as metaphors on this analysis. For any metaphor with a standard subject-predicate form there is a corresponding simile comparing the subject and predicate; for example, 'God is our father' and 'God is like a father' or 'The Lord is my shepherd' and 'The Lord is like a shepherd'. Since both metaphor and simile presumably involve the same movement of words between language games, they will both count as metaphorical on Kenny's proposal. For the reason given above, it seems that any

utterances referring to past events, numbers, or quantities will also be metaphorical. A further difficulty arises for an utterance like 'God is a part of the Holy Trinity', where both the subject and predicate are religious expressions. Since the terms do not appear to belong to different language games, the sentence will not be metaphorical on Kenny's own account of metaphor; but this will be inconsistent with his contention that all talk of God is metaphorical.

What of Kenny's claim that religious language is *irreducibly* metaphorical? Even if we agreed that an utterance referring to God is metaphorical, it does not follow that the content of such an utterance cannot at least in part be expressed by literal sentences. Kenny does, however, offer a further argument. He considers the sentence 'God wrote his law in the hearts of men' and compares it with 'St Francis wrote his law in the hearts of men'.

In the case of St Francis, one could describe literally what he did. By his instruction, encouragement, example, he brought it about that his disciples followed his rule with enthusiasm. But when God wrote his law in the hearts of men, what did God do? There is nothing which can be assigned as the way in which he brought it about that the children of Israel loved his law. (2005, p. 40)

However, it is not clear how the contrast Kenny makes here is relevant to reducibility. Presumably the metaphor means *something like* the following: God has given us an awareness of his commands and we are all able to recognise what they are. Kenny seems to be arguing that because we cannot explain *how* God wrote his law in the hearts of men, the sentence must be irreducibly metaphorical. But this misplaces the issue. An irreducible metaphor is an utterance the content of which we cannot convey literally; it is not an utterance that refers to something the occurrence of which we cannot explain. We do not, for example, understand the mechanism that causes amino acid sequences to fold up into particular proteins, but it does not follow that hypotheses about such interactions are metaphorical.

Whereas McFague's support of IT is only verbal, Kenny genuinely aims to defend the thesis. But as we have seen, the arguments he offers are not persuasive, and his analysis of metaphor puzzling. Lacking an argument for IT, however, is not the same as showing that the theory is indefensible. It is time to look at Alston's argument for this stronger position.

The irreducibility thesis: Alston

Alston's argument against IT follows from some general proposals he puts forward on the nature of metaphors. He understands the difference between metaphorical and literal sentences in terms of the stated relationship in the sentence between the subject and predicate. When using a literal predicate expression, 'I utter the sentence with the claim that the property signified by the predicate is possessed by the subject (the referent of the subject-term) or, if the predicate is a relational one, that the property holds between the subjects' (1989, p. 43). For example, if I say 'Martin fell down the stairs', I claim that the relational property signified by 'fell down' holds between Martin and the stairs. If that relationship actually holds, then the statement is literally true. In contrast, in saying (8), one is clearly not claiming the property signified by 'fell across' holds between an iron curtain and Europe.

8. An iron curtain fell across Europe.

Rather, the predicate is being used metaphorically. Alston takes the communication of a metaphorical utterance to be a two-stage process. First, the hearer is invited to imagine a literal application of the predicate expression or exemplar. In (8), the dropping of an iron curtain functions as the exemplar, and the assertion of the metaphorical utterance presents us with the thought that there is a similarity between the exemplar and the state of Europe. Second, the exemplar is used by the speaker to 'model' the subject and draw attention to various resemblances between the exemplar and the subject. Churchill's use of the exemplar of a falling iron curtain is used to convey, for example, various further ideas about the post-war situation in Europe: the difficulty of exchanging information or moving people or goods between the Soviet Union and western Europe. The speaker's intentions in using the metaphor can often be detected from the context of the metaphor's utterance, and in many cases the metaphor already has a familiar use. Alston allows that these intentions need not be formulated in the speaker's mind and may be only implicit (1989, p. 24).⁴ Alston also notes that a hearer may exploit the exemplar/subject model in ways that the speaker does not intend and in so doing generates different metaphors.

To refute IT, Alston aims to show that the content of a metaphor can, at least in part, be expressed literally. However, he notes that in one respect the meaning of a metaphor might *not* be possible to

capture in literal terms. For example, a metaphor involves a comparison between exemplar and subject that may be 'open-ended'. Metaphorical sentences, Alston argues, 'always have what might (metaphorically) be called a penumbra of inexplicit suggestions that surround whatever definite propositional content is present.' (1989, p. 27) Notwithstanding this exception, Alston argues that the propositional content of a metaphor can be at least partially expressed in literal terms. Specifically, there are two sorts of literal truth claims in the content of any metaphor.

First, there is an unspecific propositional content, that the exemplar is (literally) similar to the subject in a way that makes it a useful model for the subject. Alston calls this M-similarity. That a metaphor involves positing an M-similarity follows straightforwardly from Alston's two-stage theory of metaphor. The posited M-similarity between the subject and exemplar in a metaphor guarantees that it can be given a partial literal paraphrase. That is, for any metaphor, part of its literal content can be paraphrased by 'The [exemplar] is similar to the [subject]'. Second, metaphors have propositional content that is specific. Suppose the speaker asserts 'God is my rock', using the metaphor with the intention of attributing to God some property *P*. Alston calls *P* the *specific content*; in this case, the specific content might be *gives me confidence* or *provides me with support*. Insofar as the speaker can form some concept of *P*, it should be possible to express *P* in language and use it as a predicate term. Consequently, it should be possible to express for any metaphor about God a corresponding literal sentence of the form 'God is *P*', where *P* can be substituted with the specific point of resemblance that the speaker intends. Alston does not claim that the speaker should be in a position to state this literal claim, only that it is in principle expressible.

IT fails, according to Alston, because metaphors, religious metaphors in particular, are always in principle susceptible to two kinds of literal paraphrase: an unspecific and some more specific literal claim about the resemblance between the subject and the exemplar.

How effective is Alston's refutation of IT? His argument is not quite as compelling as it may appear: he does not claim that literally expressible content of both unspecific and specific types is available for *any* metaphor but only for metaphors that speakers intend to assert as true. The 'thesis does not extend to the case in which the speaker simply puts forward, e.g., kingship as a possible model for God, inviting the hearer to make of it what he can' (1989, p. 30). As Alston points out, the supporter of IT could argue that metaphorical talk of God involves

literal predication but only of unspecific resemblances. For example, when one says 'God is king', one presents only some unspecific resemblance between God and kings and not some more specific point of similarity *P*. Call this the *unspecific resemblance theory* (URT). Alston argues against this position that it would result in significant revisions to religious language. For example, if all a speaker does in talking about God is say that God has some unspecific resemblance to such and such, then not only will any utterance about God be trivially true, because there is always *some* sort of resemblance between two things, but utterances like 'God is a spider' or 'God is a mud pie' will be 'on a par' with 'God created the heavens and the earth' or 'God commanded us to love one another' (1989, pp. 32–3). Moreover, Alston points out, it follows from URT that apparently inconsistent religious claims will be logically compatible. 'The fact that a loving and merciful human being is a suitable model for God certainly does not logically exclude the possibility that an arbitrarily cruel and bloodthirsty human being is a suitable model for God (in some respect or other).' (1989, p. 33) Alston's point is not that the unspecific resemblance theory is incoherent but that its revisionary implications are religiously unacceptable: it is 'apostasy' (1989, p. 36).

Alston argues persuasively that URT will have revisionary consequences for religious discourse and as such is unsatisfactory as a theory about the meaning of religious utterances. Moreover, it is evident that in many cases speakers do not just intend an unspecific resemblance when talking of God. However, Alston's discussion of URT is a red herring. Consider the two versions of the irreducibility thesis given by McFague and Kenny. For all the problems with what they propose, both are attempting non-revisionary theories of religious discourse. If McFague is right, then all claims about God are metaphorical (even if speakers think that they are talking literally). And Kenny, although he presents as his starting point the theory that God is ineffable, is not proposing any revision of religious discourse. Kenny takes it to follow from a fact about the way in which the concept of God is used, specifically that it does not 'belong' in any 'language game', that all talk of God is metaphorical. This suggests that supporters of IT or at least a significant cohort of them would agree with Alston and reject URT as a revisionary version of the theory.

Supporters of IT might also question a central assumption in Alston's critique of the theory. Alston's argument is dominated by considerations about the speaker's intentions when engaging in religious discourse rather than the meaning of the uttered sentences. He contends that

in using a metaphor the speaker intends to posit some resemblance between the subject and exemplar and then argues that the intended resemblance must be expressible literally. But if this argument is to be successful against IT, it requires that the speaker's intentions determine the content of the metaphor. It is not clear why a supporter of IT should have to accept this. Suppose that the supporter of IT adopts a secondary meaning theory of metaphor, such as the one put forward by Searle. As noted in the earlier discussion of Searle, this theory takes the content of the metaphor to be what the metaphor actually says, but there is a secondary meaning which can be extracted from what the metaphorical utterance implies. To work out this secondary meaning, one must appeal to additional contextual information. This contextual information may include facts about the speaker's intentions, but this is not always the case. For example, we do not need to know about the speaker's intentions to work out the secondary meaning of (7), and the meaning of (7) would not change if what the speaker intended by it changed.⁵ So while Alston may have a successful argument to show that it is always possible to (in part) literally paraphrase the *content of the intentions* of a speaker of a metaphor, he has not shown that the content of metaphors can be literally paraphrased.

A different line of objection to Alston comes from the critic of IT. Why does Alston concede that the content of metaphors is not *wholly* expressible in literal terms? Call the thesis that the content of a metaphor can in principle be wholly captured literally the reducibility theory (RT). Why reject RT? We saw earlier that Alston argues that metaphors are 'open-ended' in that they have any number of inexplicit implications and these cannot be exhaustively captured in literal. However, IT concerns the *content* of metaphors. Why should the difficulty in literally saying what a metaphor *implies* be relevant to the literal expression of a metaphor's content? Alston also argues, however, that there may be cases where the open-endedness 'affects the propositional content of a metaphorical statement' (1989, p. 27). It is not clear exactly what Alston means by this, but he seems to suggest that the content of a metaphor could be inherently suggestive and difficult to pin down. Now, for many metaphors this does not seem correct. 'God is my rock', for example, has an easily stated content: the determinate and trivially false content *God is my rock*. But even supposing that a metaphor has open-ended content, why shouldn't this be paraphrased literally? Literal statements, just as much as metaphorical ones, can be ambiguous, elusive, insightful, baffling, and so on. What is required for a literal expression of an open-ended

metaphor, therefore, is a literal sentence or collection of sentences that are similarly suggestive. Alston does not show that such a paraphrase could not be given. Alston's worry with RT seems to confuse a literal paraphrase of a metaphor with an attempt to make it fully explicit. Clearly, we cannot literally specify all of the inexplicit suggestions of a metaphor, since there may be an arbitrarily large number of them. But RT requires only that there are literal sentences that can convey similar range of inexplicit suggestions. Alston gives no reason why this should not be possible.

Alston's argument falls short, therefore, of providing a knockout blow to IT; he may also have been too generous to IT in conceding that the content of religious metaphors cannot be fully expressed literally. However, the IT is susceptible to another line of objection.

Another problem for the irreducibility thesis

Supporters of IT tend to give few details on the theory of metaphor that they are employing. So is IT a coherent position to adopt on any of the major theories?

IT is clearly indefensible on a Davidsonian account. If a metaphor is typically just a patently false literal sentence that is used to (causally) stimulate further ideas, then no metaphorical meaning comes into play. There is no metaphorical meaning to reduce or paraphrase in literal terms. The content of 'The Lord is my shepherd' is (literally) that the Lord is my shepherd.

On the face of it, a similar problem is going to arise for the secondary meaning theories of metaphor, such as the Grice/Searle and interaction theories. Both accounts require the patent literal falsity of the metaphor to indicate that some secondary meaning – what is implied on the Gricean account or some additional meaning that we can extract from the content on the interaction theory – should be looked for. So it appears that IT fails from the outset on secondary meaning theories, since metaphors have literally expressible (and false) content. However, perhaps the IT could be modified, while keeping to the spirit of the position, in the following way.

IT*: Utterances about God have a primary meaning (a literal content) that is literally expressible but a secondary meaning that is irreducible and cannot be literally paraphrased.

Unfortunately, IT* runs into a serious difficulty. Take the utterance 'God is our father'. On the secondary meaning theory, the evident

falsity of the literal content of this claim leads us to look for a secondary meaning. Candidates for the secondary meaning include: God cares for us, God guides us, and God nurtures us. Since these are sentences about God, it follows from IT* that they are not themselves literal. Suppose, therefore, that they are metaphorical. The secondary meaning account requires that they have false literal content that leads us to look for some secondary meaning or, in this case, to a tertiary meaning of the original utterance. However, the candidates for tertiary meanings will also presumably be about God (or if they aren't, they will literally be expressible, and IT* will be false). So now the same problem will arise for the tertiary sentences. Are they literally expressible, in which case IT* fails, or are they metaphorical, in which case we will have the same problem with quaternary sentences? In an attempt to arrive at a theory of metaphorical irreducibility, IT* analyses the meaning of religious utterances as collections of literal falsities.

How does IT fare on the contextualist position? Recall that the contextualist believes that metaphors are loose utterances. Looseness is also a widespread feature of literal utterances ('the fish is raw', and so on). But in literal cases we unreflectively construct ad hoc concepts without being struck by the subject-predicate. Metaphorical utterances, in contrast, exhibit a greater degree of looseness sufficiently obvious for us to regard them as non-literal (Recanati's 'feeling of discrepancy', cited above). All that is involved in claiming that talk of God is metaphorical, therefore, is that it is a bit looser and more obviously so than is commonly the case with literal utterances. Notably, on this theory, it is not very surprising and is in fact quite plausible that talk of God should be metaphorical. God is a unique being with distinctive properties. So it is only to be expected that predicates applied to God, particularly those that are also commonly used in non-religious contexts, should be relatively loose. However, if contextualists are right about metaphor, it is unclear what philosophically could be gained by insisting that all talk of God is metaphorical. For example, if one thought that divine ineffability presented a problem for literal predication of God, why would metaphorical talk fare any better? Metaphors use ad hoc concepts with extensions that are broader than or partly overlap their literal counterparts, but they still represent their subject matter as being a certain way (as being a shepherd*, say, rather than being a shepherd). Moreover, it is difficult to see how a metaphor could be irreducible. For suppose that in the utterance 'God is my rock' the concept ROCK undergoes loosening and is modified to ROCK*. It should be possible to explain the content of ROCK* by spelling out, in literal terms, how it differs from ROCK.

Similarly, for all such cases, the literal content of a metaphor should be literally specifiable.

We have found that two leading proponents of IT have seriously flawed accounts and that IT and IT* are indefensible on any mainstream theory of metaphor. Short of providing an alternative general theory of metaphor that could deliver a plausible version of IT, we should reject metaphorical theories of religious discourse. Metaphors are widely used in religious discourse, sometimes with great effect, but they are neither irreducible nor all-pervading.

14

Fictionalism

In this chapter we consider three varieties of hermeneutic fictionalism. The first of these picks up on the fictionalist development of apophatic theology that we touched on in Chapter 2. The second addresses an interesting way of constructing religious fictionalism on the basis that religious ‘believers’ are self-deceived. The third offers, I believe, a successful version of hermeneutic fictionalism but succeeds by diverging from face value theory in only a very modest way.

Praise

In Chapter 2 we considered a way of developing apophatic theology as a variety of moderate attitude theory (the ‘linguistic option’), whereby religious sentences about God are interpreted as having both descriptive and non-cognitive content. For example the sentence

1. God is x .

where x refers to a property ascribed to God, should be interpreted as having the representational content (1a) but also as conventionally tied to the expression of a non-cognitive attitude (A) directed towards God given by (1b).

- 1a. God is x .
- 2b. A (God).

I characterised this as a form of moderate attitude theory that interprets language about God as a kind of ‘praise’. For although the theory allows that sentences represent God as having various properties, they are also

taken to express the believer's attitudes of devotion, respect, love, and so on, towards God. For example, the sentence

2. God is omnipotent.

could be interpreted as saying (something like):

3. Oh, God the almighty!

The sentence both calls God almighty and praises God as almighty.

However, we also noted another closely related theory (the 'speech act option'), which takes religious *sentences* to be purely representational – that is, they do not, as a matter of convention, express any non-cognitive attitudes – but proposes that speakers *use* such sentences to express non-cognitive attitudes rather than beliefs in their representational content. Both linguistic and speech act options take the expression of non-cognitive attitudes to be part of the meaning of religious utterances about God. They are different because the linguistic option takes non-cognitive element to be part of the conventional meaning of religious sentences about God, whereas the speech action option takes it to be something that emerges from the way in which speakers use religious sentences.

The difference between the linguistic and speech act options corresponds to different ways of disagreeing with the face value account. The linguistic option is a moderate form of attitude theory that interprets the content of religious sentences about God to be given by (1a) and (1b), and interprets utterances about God (assuming they are used in accordance with linguistic convention) also to be given by (1a) and (1b). I suggested that this was a plausible way of developing the position adopted by apophatic theologians. Also, as we noted in the earlier discussion of apophatic theology, the representational content of what is said about God's nature would be in all cases untrue because God is conceptually transcendent. In contrast, the speech act option is a variety of fictionalism that interprets the sentence (1) at face value – that is, as saying just (1a) – whereas the utterance of (1) is interpreted as saying (1b). In other words, in religious discourse speakers use sentences that represent God as having such and such properties to express non-cognitive attitudes towards God rather than beliefs about God. A different way of making this point, as we saw in Chapter 2, is that the speech act option takes the illocutionary acts or speech acts performed by speakers in uttering indicative sentences about God to be praise (the expression

of attitudes of devotion, awe, and so on, towards God) rather than assertions of beliefs about God. This is a form of fictionalism, because the utterance of an indicative sentence about God is not an assertoric act; it is a quasi-assertion that expresses a non-cognitive attitude of praise towards God. I also claimed in Chapter 2 that the speech act option presented a different way of developing the apophatic position and that it is suggested by work on religious language by Jean-Luc Marion and Jacques Derrida. Let's now turn to what Marion and Derrida have written on the subject before evaluating the speech act option as a theory of the meaning of religious discourse about God.

Marion is sympathetic to apophatic theology, in particular to Denys's idea that God is conceptually transcendent. His expression of the idea that God is impossible to adequately conceptualise is in the language of contemporary French phenomenology. Conceiving of something, according to Marion, involves placing some descriptive limitation or restriction on that thing. God and other religious phenomena, Marion claims, are 'saturated phenomena' that cannot be captured by the limitations and restrictions of human concepts:

That he is the given par excellence implies that 'God' is given without restriction, without reserve, without restraint. 'God' is given not at all partially, following this or that outline, like a constituted object that nevertheless offers to the intentional gaze only a specific side of its sensible visibility ... but absolutely, without the reserve of any outline, with every side open.... (1994, p. 588)

However, Marion finds in Denys's writings a way of interpreting religious discourse as referring to God without ascribing properties to God. He proposes that Denys's claim that God is 'good' should not be understood as a description of God but as addressing God. The predicate is not used to describe but rather to laud God: 'in the apprehension of goodness the dimension is cleared where the very possibility of a categorical statement concerning God ceases to be valid, and where the reversal of de-nomination into praise becomes inevitable' (1995, p. 76). Marion calls this a non-objectifying and non-predicative way of talking about God 'praise', although he also compares it to 'prayer'. Marion characterises praise as a form of speech that has a laudatory aspect but is combined with a recognition (at least by the speaker) that the property that is apparently predicated of God is inappropriate. Praise 'feeds on the impossibility or, better, the impropriety of the category' (1995, p. 76). In talking of God, therefore, speakers praise God but recognise the impropriety of

the concepts they are using to represent God; the predicate expressions are not used with the belief that they accurately represent God. James Smith, in a recent work discussing apophatic theology and its treatment in the phenomenological tradition, offers the following characterisation of praise: 'Thus it is possible to speak about God, but in the mode of *praise*, as a non-objectifying, non-positivistic mode of conceptualization which does not reduce God to a concept, but rather employs language in such a way that respects God's transcendence and *refers* the listener to experience the thing itself' (2002, p. 128).

I take Marion to be sympathetic to the speech act option for two main reasons. First, he characterises calling God 'good' (and, presumably, any utterance ascribing a property to God) as a form of praise rather than a descriptive assertion. Second, he presents praise as a matter of the employment of religious sentences by speakers – that is, as a speech act – rather than a fact about the meaning of the sentences themselves. Marion's position can also be understood as a variety of fictionalism since, as we have noted, the predicates used of God are taken to be 'improper'. In saying 'God is good' speakers do not, therefore, believe or assert that *God is good*.

Derrida's discussion of religious discourse is in part responsive to Marion's account. He raises the objection that praising God (the 'encomium' of God), on Marion's account, still involves predication:

For if the encomium or the celebration of God indeed does not have the same rule of predication as every other proposition, even if the 'truth' to which it lays claim is the higher truth of a hyperessentiality, it celebrates and names what 'is' such as it 'is,' beyond Being. Even if it is not a predicative affirmation of the current type, the encomium preserves the style and the structure of a predicative affirmation. It says something about someone. [Praise] entails a predicative aim, however foreign it may be to 'normal' ontological predication. (1992, p. 137)

By 'style and structure' I take Derrida to mean that utterances about God made in an act of praising God have a similar appearance to utterances that are straightforwardly descriptive of God. He takes this to show that the predicates used in acts of praise are (at least in part) descriptive. Derrida proposes instead that religious talk about God should be understood as prayer rather than praise.

As Jean-Luc Marion correctly remarks, the encomium is 'neither true nor false, not even contradictory,' although it says something *about*

the thearchy, about the Good and the analogy; and if its attributions or namings do not belong to the ordinary signification of truth, but rather to a hypertruth that is ruled by a hyperessentiality, in this it does not merge with the movement of prayer itself, which does not speak *of*, but *to*.' (1992, p. 111)

Unlike praise, prayer is a form of address that, Derrida argues, is entirely non-descriptive. Prayer 'is not predicative, theoretical (*theological*), or constative.' (1995, p. 110) He elaborates:

I will hold to one other distinction: prayer in itself, one may say, implies nothing other than the supplicating address to the other, perhaps beyond all supplication and giving, to give the promise of His presence as other, and finally the transcendence of His otherness itself, even without any other determination; the encomium, although it is not a simple attributive speech, nevertheless preserved an irreducible relationship to the attribution. (1995, p. 111)

Derrida's objection to Marion, as I understand it, seems to miss the mark. Clearly, the utterance (4) has the same 'style and structure' as (5).

4. God is good.
5. The table is square.

However, the claim that 'good' is used by the speaker to *describe* its object in (4) in the same way 'square' is used by the speaker to describe its object in (5) is, I take it, precisely what Marion aims to deny in saying that (4) should be understood as praise and not an assertion of belief. Marion does not give specifics, but I take him to interpret the utterance of (4) as meaning (something like):

6. Oh, God you are good!

(6) is understood as an expression of (say) the speaker's respect and admiration of God. That is, the speaker is not in praising God expressing the belief that God is good but is lauding or approving God without having the belief that 'good' adequately represents God's nature. More generally, in talking about God speakers use predicate terms as part of the expression of non-cognitive states rather than descriptively of God. So a speaker, in stating 'God is good' is not asserting or expressing the belief *that God is good*. Instead, the speaker is engaged in a non-cognitive

quasi-assertion. Derrida is, in effect, reading too much into the surface appearance of utterances: it is possible to use an indicative sentence without asserting or believing it or putting it forward as a true description. According to the speech act option, (5) and (6) may look similar and they are similar locutionary acts, but they are not thereby speech acts of the same type.

Derrida's own suggestion that talk of God should be understood as prayer does not seem to have any advantage over the position he is criticising. For prayer also involves utterances that appear to represent God: 'Our Father, which art in heaven', for instance. Perhaps Derrida has in mind prayerful utterances that address God but do not say anything about God (as with much of the rest of the Lord's Prayer). If this is what Derrida intends, then he is recommending the speakers revise religious discourse by addressing God rather than say anything that looks like a description of God. Notably, the theory that God is conceptually transcendent will motivate such a revision if we interpret religious utterances at face value, which is what I understand Marion to be offering an alternative to. However, if Derrida is offering a revisionary proposal for how speakers might engage with religious discourse if they take God to be conceptually transcendent, then he is not providing a distinctive account of the meaning of religious discourse as it is practised.

Derrida does not provide a persuasive objection to Marion's account of religious talk about God as praise, nor does Marion deliver a plausible interpretation of religious utterances. The problem is not with the 'praise' element of religious utterances. I have already set out my own reasons for supporting a *partly* expressive interpretation of religious language (and discourse), provided that it is combined with a descriptive account of the content of religious sentences. The problem is with the idea that the predicates ascribed to God might be recognised as inadequate by *speakers*. This seems implausible: speakers in many cases clearly believe what they are saying about God. Marion might argue that such religious believers have *false* beliefs about God's nature, but to claim that they do not have beliefs about God's nature that they intend to communicate is a misrepresentation of speakers' states of mind. A similar revisionary option is available to Marion and to Derrida; that is, to argue that religious believers should revise their attitudes and praise God but not form beliefs about God's nature. However, this would be revolutionary fictionalism about religion rather than a theory of the meaning of religious utterances, and its merits in this case would largely depend on the success of arguments for the theological and metaphysical theory about God's conceptual transcendence.

Religious self-deception

Georges Rey has defended a position akin to hermeneutic religious fictionalism that he calls *meta-atheism* (2006). His way around the apparent difficulties with the theory is to argue that among practitioners of religion there is widespread self-deception:

Despite appearances, many Western adults who've been exposed to standard science and sincerely claim to believe in God are self-deceived; at some level they believe the claim is false. (2006, p. 337)

For anyone with a basic education in science, Rey contends, it is obvious that religious claims are false. Rey is not proposing, however, that educated religious people are deceitful or insincere when they affirm religious claims since they may think of themselves as believing what they are saying: 'insincerity arises when someone *says* something, intending it to be believed, that they consciously know full well they wouldn't avow' (2006, p. 338). Why do religious people not recognise and consciously draw out the implications of their disbelief? Rey suggests a number of reasons: loyalty to family and other social groups, personal ties and identifications with religious groups and institutions, resistance to changing one's public stance, the wish for one's life to be part of a larger project.

For Rey's theory that religious people are self-deceived to provide the basis for hermeneutic religious fictionalism, we would need an account of self-deception whereby religious avowals are not genuine assertions or do not express the speaker's religious beliefs. Rey at points indicates a preference for this account, but he does not explicitly endorse or defend it as the best. Moreover, Rey also writes, 'I can well imagine someone regarding self-deceptive beliefs as genuine beliefs, and as simply manifesting ways in which people's beliefs can be bizarrely irrational and compartmentalized', and 'there may be *further* levels at which [religious people] may also believe in God' (2006, p. 337). If religious speakers express religious beliefs that they have 'at some level' despite also believing on some other 'compartmentalized' level those religious claims false, then hermeneutic religious fictionalism does not follow from Rey's claims about the self-deception of educated religious people. Nevertheless, Rey's theory does provide the materials for a defence of hermeneutic religious fictionalism if being self-deceived about *p* entails that one does not genuinely assert that *p*. I will proceed for the moment on the basis that this theory of self-deception is correct and return to

it later. Given this, Rey is arguing that when (appropriately educated) religious people appear to profess belief in God, they are self-deceived and not expressing religious beliefs. Following the characterisation of fictionalism in the introduction, we can understand the mental state expressed by a religious avowal as a type of acceptance. Acceptance of a religious claim, in this case, is to be in a conflicted state of self-deception that falls short of belief: on some level or in some uncritical contexts one goes along with the claim as if it were true while also believing in critical and reflective contexts that it is false. Accordingly, a religious avowal can be understood as a kind of quasi-assertion whereby the speaker puts forward a religious claim without genuinely believing it to be true.

Although Rey takes religious claims to be false, it is not the falsity of religious claims that is required to defend hermeneutic fictionalism but rather that religious beliefs appear *obviously* false to religious people. Rey needs to establish this in order to motivate his contention that religious people know 'at some level' that what they purport to believe is not really the case and therefore that they are self-deceived on religious matters. There are two stages to Rey's argument for this contention. First, he distinguishes (a) serious and difficult 'philosophical' issues, such as the existence of universals or the nature of meaning, from (b) 'shallow' empirical issues that do not merit serious philosophical consideration and can be settled without difficulty by observation and reflection, such as the existence of ghosts or gremlins. Rey proposes to put claims about God into the latter category. However, religious questions are treated and have been treated very seriously over many centuries by philosophers who are neither frivolous nor unintelligent. So Rey needs to establish that philosophers have been wrong to treat religious questions seriously. This is the second stage of his argument. He does this by briefly setting out standard problems for belief in God. For example, he makes the stock point that natural evil 'provides reason to doubt there's any such being' (2006, p. 340). He also raises well-known objections to arguments for the existence of God; for example, that the design argument 'can't be taken seriously since Darwin'.

Rey's strategy is unconvincing. In the space of just a few pages Rey can do little more than rehearse the starting points of various familiar antitheistic arguments in philosophy of religion. His claim that the occurrence of natural evil provides an argument against the existence of a benevolent God, for example, is not the knockout blow to religious belief he needs it to be but just the opening gambit of a debate that has generated a huge literature. Perhaps Rey would argue that most of this literature has been of low philosophical quality; but what he

needs for his argument is that there is *nothing* to take seriously on this topic in the philosophy of religion; that is, it falls into category (b). Rey doesn't establish this; treating a topic as if it shouldn't be taken seriously does not show that the topic isn't serious. Moreover, the existence of God seems clearly to fall into category (a). Aren't classic works in the philosophy of religion such as J. L. Mackie's 'Evil and Omnipotence' or Alvin Plantinga's *God, Freedom and Evil* serious and rather good and interesting works? Rey could argue that Mackie and Plantinga are in different ways self-deceived (Plantinga for defending a view that 'at some level' he knows is obviously false; Mackie for taking seriously a topic that he knows 'at some level' obviously does not merit it), but this would be question begging. The obvious falsity of religious belief needs to be established to argue that people are self-deceived about it.

Rey does have a supplementary argument. Religious discourse exhibits features that, he suggests, show that it is 'understood to be fictional from the start' (2006, p. 345). He offers three main pieces of supporting evidence. First, religious claims rely on texts and authorities for their support, support that is largely insensitive to (in the Christian case) biblical scholarship or historical assessment (2006, p. 344). In contrast, science has no sacred texts and only 'provisional' figures of authority; the authority of a scientist or a scientific text depends on the degree to which what they say is supported by current research. Second, religious claims are akin to fictions because they are *detail resistant*. For example, in the Christian story of the creation of the universe, very few details are given on how the creation happened – how exactly God brought the universe into existence, how his intervention occurred, the sequence of events, and so on – and no serious research is conducted to assess the story. In contrast, there is detailed information available about the origins of life and the universe and extensive ongoing scientific research programs underway that continue to fill in more of those details. Third, Rey thinks that religious discourse resembles fictional discourse because of the tolerance religious people show to what he takes to be patently 'delusional' and 'idiosyncratic' claims. The story of Abraham obeying God's command to sacrifice his son is given as example. In summary, Rey proposes that the use of religious discourse betrays the sketchiness, the lack of supporting evidence (and lack of interest in supporting evidence), and tolerance of fantastic implausibilities that also characterise our use of fiction.

Although we have seen that Rey's view that religious beliefs are obviously false is unpersuasive, does his supplementary argument about the similarities of religious and fictional discourses lend support to his

meta-atheist theory that religious people do not believe 'at some level' their own religious claims? The problem with Rey's argument is that it relies on an unfair and misleading comparison between the claims of the majority of (educated) practising religious people and *professional* scientists. If we look at scientific discourse as it is employed by many people – and specifically those with the same basic education in the field that Rey assumes in the religious case – it does not come out much better than religious discourse with respect to the criteria that Rey proposes. Take a quite simply stated and understood scientific theory such as the Darwinian theory of evolution. Most people who claim to believe this theory have little knowledge or interest in the evidence in its favour; they might think that it has something to do with the fossil record, for instance. We would also expect appeals to authority in justifying the theory: it is the leading account in biology textbooks, is widely supported by biologists, and has the backing of the great scientist Charles Darwin! Among people prepared to affirm that evolutionary theory is true (particularly those who do so on the basis of scientific authorities), one is not likely to find anything comparable to the checking of texts and historical evidence that Rey finds suspiciously absent among people who make religious claims on the basis of biblical authority (2006, p. 343). Similarly, most people's understanding of scientific theories is often sketchy, often expressed in metaphor, and limited to a superficial level of detail: it is, as Rey puts it, detail resistant. Rey's third point, that some religious claims are delusional, seems to be rhetorically of a piece with his contention that they should not be treated seriously. If his point is just that some religious claims presented in certain contexts can look bizarre, then the same applies to some scientific claims, notably some of the central claims of quantum mechanics.

Perhaps Rey could concede that most educated people's use of religious *and* scientific discourse is akin to their use of fictional discourse. However, he could argue that in the professional context, in the use of scientific discourse but *not* in the use of religious discourse, there are no ultimate authorities, and it is possible to investigate and to fill in the details of theories. Rey's position would then be that while both religious and scientific discourse are widely used as fiction, religious discourse is comprehensively fictional, whereas in science there are professionals who can credibly be said to believe what they are saying. To establish this, however, Rey would need to show that there is no comparable group of professional theologians – such as Bible scholars or systematic theologians – who have religious beliefs. This is not something he attempts to do. So neither Rey's argument about

self-deception among religious people nor his comparison of religious and fictional discourse provides good reasons for hermeneutic religious fictionalism.

Suppose that cogent and compelling arguments could be made in favour of meta-atheism; to what extent does this support hermeneutic religious fictionalism? For meta-atheism to be a form of religious fictionalism, a particular account of self-deception is required. It is not essential for hermeneutic religious fictionalism that religious people have formed the belief, on any 'level', that their religious claims are false; what is essential is that they do not believe that what they are saying is true or, at least, that if they have any religious beliefs – if they exist on some 'level' – those beliefs are not expressed in their religious avowals. Rey writes, 'I can well imagine someone regarding self-deceptive beliefs as genuine beliefs, and as simply manifesting ways in which people's beliefs can be bizarrely irrational and compartmentalized', and 'there may be *further* levels at which [religious people] may also believe in God' (2006, p. 337). In other words, the arguments for meta-atheism are compatible with accounts of self-deception that are not consistent with hermeneutic religious fictionalism. If religious people believe their religious claims and 'at some level' believe those religious claims are false but do not recognize this inconsistency because of compartmentalization of their beliefs, then meta-atheism will be true and hermeneutic religious fictionalism false. So even if – contrary to what we have found – there are good arguments for meta-atheism, a successful hermeneutic religious fictionalism will require an argument for Rey's preferred account of self-deception.

Modest fictionalism

Notwithstanding the numerous problems that hermeneutic fictionalism about religion encounters, there is, I think, a version of the theory that is both defensible and plausible. However, this theory is quite unlike the other attempts at fictionalism that we have considered. For the theory does not propose that we should treat religious claims as akin to fictions or that religious utterances are metaphorical or even that religious speakers do not genuinely believe what they are saying. Rather, the theory is that while indicative religious utterances satisfy most of the conditions for assertions – most importantly, they typically express religious beliefs – they differ in one main respect. Moreover, this difference is sufficiently significant and systematic to show that religious indicative utterances should be thought of as a distinct kind of speech act. I call this position

modest fictionalism. To see why modest fictionalism is plausible, we need to begin by considering what makes for an assertion.

The earlier discussions of religious language and truth took assertion to be a speech act connected with the expression of the speaker's beliefs. However, while this connection is intuitively plausible, it is clear that this is not a complete characterisation of assertion: a speaker expressing her beliefs is neither necessary nor sufficient for an assertion. There are many expressions of belief that are not assertions. For example, I can roll my eyes to express the belief that I'm bored without asserting that I am bored. Moreover, there are many linguistic acts that express beliefs but are not assertions. If I ask you to join me for lunch, I express my belief that you have not yet had lunch, but I have not thereby asserted that you have not yet had lunch; I have only issued an invitation. There are also non-literal assertions that do not (or at least not in a straightforward way) express the speaker's belief. Someone who says 'Love is a journey' does not believe in the content of that utterance, but the speech act seems to be an assertion. Metaphors can be asserted, just as they can form part of questions, requests, and so on. In addition, we have generally been considering sincere assertions. However, there can clearly be insincere assertions where the speaker does not believe what is asserted. Perhaps it could be argued that an insincere assertion should be thought of as expressing belief in its content even if the speaker does not have that belief. One might say of a liar, for example, that the speaker deceived people by expressing a belief that he did not really hold. But it seems possible that there are cases of genuine assertion that are openly insincere (MacFarlane, 2011) where the speaker does not believe what is said and hearers also recognise that the speaker does not intend to say what she believes. It is difficult to see how an assertion involving open insincerity can be understood as expressing a belief. How, therefore, should we analyse assertion to accommodate these exceptions while also preserving the intuitive link between assertion and belief?

One of the most plausible and influential accounts of assertion is given by Robert Stalnaker (1999). He points out that assertions are made in contexts involving speakers with various intentions and beliefs addressing hearers with various intentions and beliefs (that is, a conversation) and that the assertion is intended to modify that context by affecting the attitudes of the participants. At each point in a conversation, various propositions are presupposed by the participants. In asserting something, he argues, one proposes to add its content to a 'common ground' of information presupposed in a conversation. Notably, Stalnaker understands what it is to make an assertion in terms

of its 'essential effect': it is a proposal to add to the set of propositions taken for granted in the conversation. This differs from the theory that assertion is the expression of belief. However, Stalnaker's theory can explain why the content of an assertion is also usually believed by the speaker. Since the participants in a normal conversation are usually aiming to avoid error and to get closer to the truth, we should expect that speakers usually contribute to the conversation by putting forward propositions that they also believe to be true. However, it is possible that in certain conversations both speaker and hearers know that certain presuppositions are false but play along with them. A case of this sort occurs when the participants in a conversation maintain a polite fiction about somebody in order to preserve that person's sensibilities. A speaker may then make assertions on the basis of false presuppositions where neither the speaker intends to express a belief in the asserted claim nor do the hearers take the speaker to be expressing a belief. So Stalnaker's theory allows for openly insincere assertions.

Despite the attractions of Stalnaker's theory, it is not clear that assertion requires the background of a conversational context and shared presuppositions. It seems, for example, that one could assert something to oneself (unless in this case one should be taken to be both speaker and hearer and engaged in a conversation) or in a context where there are no shared presuppositions between the speaker and the hearers. MacFarlane (2011) also highlights the difficulty Stalnaker's theory has with giving a plausible account of retracting assertions. It seems that we can withdraw an assertion after having made it. But if assertion is a proposal to contribute information into the shared presuppositions of a conversation, it is difficult to see how that proposal could be undone after it has been accepted. Finally, as Stalnaker notes, his theory has difficulty in distinguishing assertions from other speech acts that change the shared presuppositions in a conversation. For example, if a proposition is put forward for the purposes of a debate without supposing that it is true, it does not seem that the proposition is asserted; it will, however, meet the conditions for an assertion on Stalnaker's theory.

A theory of assertion closely related to Stalnaker's, in that it also analyses assertion in terms of its essential effect, has its origins in an idea of Charles Peirce that 'to assert a proposition is to make oneself responsible for its truth' (1934, p. 384). This idea that assertion should be understood as a kind of normative commitment has been developed by various philosophers, including Searle (1969, p. 29; 1979, p. 12), Alston (2000), MacFarlane (2005), and Brandom (1994). For example, Brandom characterises assertion as a commitment to vindicating one's entitlement to

the asserted proposition when one is challenged. So in asserting something, on Brandom's view, one is obliged to offer some justification of what one has asserted if it is disputed.¹ A closely related commitment is that one should withdraw the assertion if it is shown to be untrue. The normative commitment theory allows for assertions where one does not believe what has been asserted: one can commit to the truth of a proposition or 'take responsibility' for its truth without believing it. On the other hand, it is also clear why assertion should be a suitable vehicle for the expression of belief: one does not normally undertake a commitment to the truth of a proposition that one does not believe is true. The commitment theory also has a more plausible account of retracting an assertion. To retract an assertion is to back out of the commitment to stand by the truth of the asserted proposition. Moreover, this theory does not require that assertions occur in the conversational contexts posited by Stalnaker.

The theory that assertion involves normative commitments – to take on the obligation of justifying the asserted proposition if challenged and withdraw the assertion if it is shown to be untrue – therefore has a number of advantages. It preserves the intuitive connection between assertion and belief while accounting for cases where assertions are made without belief as well as avoiding some of the counterintuitive consequences of Stalnaker's theory. Suppose, therefore, that we take this to be a true theory of assertion.² The question of whether a given utterance of an indicative sentence is an assertion can thereby be answered by considering whether the speaker takes on the relevant commitments; it will not be answered just by evidence about whether the speaker believes the uttered proposition. And the question of whether utterances of indicative sentences in given discourse are assertoric is not just a matter of whether the members of the community of speakers usually believe what they are saying; rather, it will be determined by the normative commitments of members of the community. Since in the following we consider whether speech acts that look like assertions really are assertions, for convenience, I use the expression *claim* to refer to a *putative assertion*; that is, an utterance of an indicative sentence. Are the norms that characterise claim-making in different discourses sufficient to judge that those claims are assertions?

If we consider the normative commitments that govern claim-making in different areas of discourse, we find that there are relevant differences between religious discourse and other areas of descriptive discourse. Let's call the two normative commitments identified above the *justification norm* (that the onus is on the speaker to justify what is asserted when

challenged on its truth) and the *retraction norm* (that the speaker should retract and not continue to assert something that has been shown to be untrue). Both of these norms seem to be in play with, for example, claims that we make about the publicly observable properties of objects in our environment. For example, if I tell you that there was an eclipse of the sun on 31 December 2012 and you question the truth of what I say, then it is plausible that there is some obligation on my part to offer something in support of what I have said. It does not matter if I do not provide any justification or if the justification I provide is entirely unconvincing; the point is that there is some reasonable expectation on me that I should have something to say in support of my assertion. Accordingly, if I'm unable or refuse to provide suitable justification, that is reasonably regarded as a failing on my part. Also, if you check the Internet, look at astronomical evidence, and find that there was no eclipse on that date and no evidence of other witnesses to an eclipse, then if I am presented with such evidence, there is some pressure on me to withdraw the assertion. I may, of course, continue to insist on what I said and do not thereby cease to have made an assertion by doing so. However, to act like this would be unreasonable or obtuse. Similar points appear to apply to other descriptive claims. Both the justification norm and the retraction norm, therefore, seem to characterise linguistic practice in the use of utterances of indicative sentences about observable properties.

In contrast, neither the justification nor retraction norms seem in general to hold in religious discourse. Take the justification norm. Arguments and evidence are, of course, frequently presented in favour of religious claims (and a great deal of philosophy of religion and theology is focused on doing exactly this), but it does not seem to be a general normative requirement on speakers that they provide support for their religious claims when challenged on the truth of what they say. It is not, in other words, a failing on the part of a religious believers that they cannot or do not address doubts about the truth of their religious claims. Suppose a speaker believes and claims the following:

7. The Book of Mormon contains an accurate account of ancient American civilisations and was originally written by prophets who lived on the American continent thousands of years ago.

If challenged on the truth of (7), the speaker might simply reiterate the point or say it is a matter of faith or respond that no evidence is needed. All of these are quite normal conversational responses to challenges

to religious claims. They do not of course satisfy the sceptic; the point here, however, is that there is no obligation on the part of the religious believer to attempt to meet the sceptic's doubts. In other words, the justification norm does not in general hold for religious discourse. Take the utterance

8. Jesus performed a miracle at Cana by transforming water into wine.

Suppose it is pointed out that we have overwhelming evidence that water does not suddenly turn into wine, not just from observation but also from the different molecular structure of the two liquids. The speaker might respond by claiming that it is not appropriate to question biblical stories because to do so shows a lack of faith. Or the speaker might say that the fact that the topic is a religious matter rather than a scientific one is why no further evidence should be expected. These responses, which are not uncommon answers to challenges to religious claims, both effectively reject the demands of the retraction norm; that is, that strong reasons to reject the truth of what is said provide a reason to withdraw the claim. In general, therefore, I think that neither the retraction nor justification norms are generally operative in religious discourse.

Two points of clarification are in order. The first is that the claim that the retraction and justification norms are not operative in religious discourse should not be taken to have any broader epistemological implications. It is distinct from and does not imply any of the following: (a) evidence and arguments are irrelevant to religious belief, (b) having justifications for one's religious beliefs isn't desirable, (c) few religious believers have at their disposal reasons that speak in favour of their beliefs and there are few arguments available for them to use if challenged, (d) religious claims are generally unwarranted. My argument here is instead about the norms of linguistic practice in religious discourse and specifically the norms that inform religious claim-making: someone who makes a religious claim is not thereby obliged to have supporting reasons at their disposal or to withdraw their claim in the face of contrary arguments that they cannot defeat. It is entirely consistent with (a) to (d). Taking these in turn: (a) Someone might be told about the argument for design, find the argument plausible, and subsequently develop religious faith; or someone might read Mackie's sceptical arguments in *The Miracle of Theism* and experience doubts about his or her religious beliefs or lose faith entirely. This does not, however, tell us anything about the norms of religious claim making. (b) It may be desirable for religious believers

to be able to respond to challenges and have arguments in support of their religious beliefs with a view to defeating sceptics and persuading others. However, this is a separate issue to the norms that are actually operative within religious discourse. (c) It may, as a matter of fact, be the case that many religious believers *are* able to respond to challenges to their religious claims (as, for example, Richard Swinburne argues); nevertheless, by making a religious claim, a speaker does not undertake the obligation to make such a response even if they are able to do so. (d) The obligations undertaken in making a religious claim are separate from the question of whether what is claimed is known to be true by the speaker or whether knowing a proposition requires, as evidentialists argue, justification by evidence. The point here is therefore also distinct from the argument against the evidentialism of Plantinga (2000) and other reformed epistemologists that religious belief may be 'properly basic' or warranted without being based on evidence. The standards for beliefs being warranted are one thing, the norms of religious claim-making another.

The second point is that while religious claims do not satisfy the norms of assertion, they are usually expressions of belief. As we have seen, the fact that a speech act expresses a belief is related to the fact that it is an assertion; it does not follow from this, however, that religious claims are not characteristically expressions of belief. Although making a religious claim does not oblige speakers to withdraw it in the face of compelling opposing evidence or justify it when challenged, speakers are in normal contexts expected to be telling the truth as they understand it. In making a religious claim, speakers do not take on the obligations of retraction and justification necessary for assertion but do typically put forward a proposition that is taken to be true. Religious claim-making typically express the speaker's beliefs and represent the world as being a certain way. Religious claiming, therefore, has much in common with assertion, but it involves fewer normative requirements than asserting and is a distinct speech act.

The argument about religious claims presented in this section can be seen to quickly win through to a form of religious hermeneutic fictionalism. Fictionalists take the position that the claims of a given discourse are not genuinely asserted (they may be quasi-asserted). Since religious claims lack the normative standards of assertion and are therefore not genuinely asserted, it follows that we should be religious fictionalists. However, fictionalists usually also take the position that quasi-assertions do not express a belief in the quasi-asserted proposition. Modest fictionalism, in contrast, does not carry any surprising results about the

relationship between the claims of religious believers and their beliefs. It is, therefore, a purely technical victory for fictionalism; it is, however, philosophically interesting that a position that seemed at the outset so intuitively difficult to maintain should be defensible.

Conclusion

We have found that hermeneutic fictionalism about religion is indefensible in most forms: it relies in some cases on an inadequately worked out account of non-literal speech or has unsatisfactory evidence in its favour, or it has highly revisionary consequences for religious discourse. But we have reached the surprising conclusion that modest fictionalism is a plausible theory of religious discourse. However, this is not the kind of fictionalism that perturbs face value realists; nor is it one that is likely to satisfy supporters of other varieties of hermeneutic fictionalism. Because, as we have seen, modest fictionalism is consistent both with religious claims having propositional content and with speakers believing what they are saying. Modest fictionalism is successful by appealing to linguistic evidence and not disputing our central intuitions about the content of claims employed in religious discourse.

Notes

1 Introduction

1. While there is no formal statement of belief with which its members are expected to agree, I think this is in line with the position set out by Don Cupitt (1984) and the views of many of the movement's participants.

2 Apophatics

1. Dummett (1981), Searle (1969), and Kotatko (1998) argue that the grammatical mood of a sentence is related to the type of speech act in which it is used as a matter of linguistic convention.
2. For literature that assesses our ideas of intrinsicness, see Lewis (1983) and Humberstone (1996).
3. This is not the same as properties that an object has by itself; there may be a relational property between two properties that an object has by itself. For example, most humans have the relational property *fingers longer than toes* by virtue of properties that they have by themselves. Humberstone (1996) identifies a number of problems with taking relational to be the opposite of intrinsic, although the contrast is widely thought to be relevant.
4. Gabriel Citron, discussion with whom has greatly aided my appreciation of apophatic theology, argues that the more radical interpretation is warranted.

3 Berkeley

1. Berkeley's argument that we do not have ideas corresponding to general terms draws on his critique of Locke's theory of abstraction (for discussion, see Mackie [1976] and Lowe [1995]). Exploring the merits of these arguments would take us too far from the current topic; for the purposes of Berkeley's argument about religious language, it is sufficient to note this as an important break from the theory that words must stand for ideas to be significant.
2. Berkeley's example has some similarities to Hume's example of the sensible knave; for discussion of Hume, see Gauthier (1992).

4 Braithwaite and Verificationism

1. Ayer noted that there are analytically true statements of ethics, religion, and so on. For example, 'An omnipotent God is omnipotent' is ostensibly a true religious statement. However, as we have seen, such statements were held to be true but not to report any matter of fact.

2. Ayer also considers conclusive falsifiability as a condition for meaningfulness; however, his objection to it is not clearly stated. For a review of the problems with this alternative, as well as the option of making either verifiability or falsifiability the criterion for factual content, see Soames (2005, pp. 280–2).
3. For further discussion, see Hempel (1950).
4. See, for example, Flew and MacIntyre (1955), Ferré (1962), Macquarrie (1967), Donovan (1975), and Tilley (1978).
5. A central figure in this history is Michael Dummett, whose seminal paper ‘Truth’ (1959) became one of the most influential texts defending the essential link between content and verification.
6. The most successful being by Wright (1986), which was endorsed by Ayer in one of his last publications (1992). See Cohen (1980) and Lewis (1988).

5 Religious Internalism

1. See Smith (1994); Brink (1989, ch. 3).
2. Note that the relationship between sincerely expressing a mental state and the possession of that mental state involves more complications than I suggest here. See Searle (1969) and Ridge (2006). We return to the issue of assertion and belief in Part III.
3. See, for a moral corollary of this argument, Graham Oddie (2009).
4. Note that this idea is put forward in his lectures but is not prominent in his occasional writings on religion.
5. The theory is prompted by Hume’s own discussion of this topic (1978, book III, part I, §I, pp. 457–8; 1978, book II, part III, §III, pp. 415–6).
6. For a more detailed account of the Humean theory of motivation, see Smith (1994, ch. 4) and Davidson (1963; 1980).
7. For objections to Smith’s argument, see Little (1997) and Shafer-Landau (2002, pp. 134–8).
8. The expressivist could argue that religious sentences are conventionally used to express pro-attitudes even if, as a matter of religious psychology, speakers have both religious beliefs and pro-attitudes. But if agents have religious beliefs distinct from pro-attitudes, the expressivist has a difficult task to persuade us that religious sentences are not used to express those beliefs. The motivation argument, at any rate, will not do so.

6 Against Expressivism

1. Though, see Chapter 4 for the difference between Blackburn’s and Gibbard’s versions of ethical expressivism.
2. As we see in Part II, however, in his later writings D. Z. Phillips seems to have endorsed a more thoroughgoing deflationary approach to religious language.
3. There have been attempts by expressivists to respond to this and similar objections, particularly by ethical expressivists (Blackburn, 1998a); however, the Frege-Geach problem remains unresolved. For further detailed analysis see Schroeder (2008).
4. See also Malcolm (1997, pp. 85–86)

7 Reference

1. The lack of syntactic structure is a common but not invariable feature of proper names: 'King Henry VIII', 'the Right Reverend Rowan Williams', 'Jack the Ripper' are arguably cases in point.
2. So as not to get into complications with the interpretation of sentences about fiction, I assume that Clark Kent and Lois Lane (and the stories about them) are true.
3. For discussion see McDowell (1977).
4. For Russell's take on this problem see (1917, p. 208).
5. Kripke additionally argued that proper names, unlike definite descriptions, designate the same object in different possible worlds. These arguments rely on modal intuitions that are less compelling than those referring to an object when in ignorance or error about it. Unlike the objections reviewed here, they present problems for descriptivist theories that take proper names to be synonymous with definite descriptions rather than descriptivist theories that take definite descriptions to determine the designation of a proper name. The arguments are also less persuasive in the current context since the descriptive content that might be taken to form part of the content of 'God' may include properties that God has in all possible worlds. For further discussion, see Sosa (2001).
6. Another prominent line of defence proposes that propositional attitude verbs like *believe* should be interpreted as having a constituent that is sensitive to the believer's perspective on the propositional content that they are said to believe. So (11), for example, specifies a relation between Marcion, the proposition that Yahweh is God, as well as an 'unarticulated constituent' involving Marcion's way of thinking about the proposition and including his way of conceiving of Yahweh and God. Since Marcion conceives of Yahweh and God differently as the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament, we can explain why (11) and (12) have different truth values: both propositional attitudes have the same believer, the same propositional content, but *different* ways of representing the proposition, so the statements do not mean the same and their truth values can differ in accordance with our intuitions. This is sometimes called the *hidden indexical theory*, because it posits a constituent of propositional attitudes that varies in context (i.e., the believer's way of thinking about the proposition) and is not explicitly expressed in the sentence. See Crimmins (1992).
7. A closely related approach is taken by Soames (2002). However, Soames allows that *some* names have descriptive content, and it is not clear what his position would be on the name 'God'; if 'God' has descriptive content, then Soames would not endorse this strategy in this case because (11) and (12) will not express the same proposition.
8. See also Katz (1994).
9. Turner's interpretation of Denys gives no role to human experiences of God (1995, pp. 4–8). If Turner is correct, then the reference objection to apophatics we have been exploring may not be resolvable for Denys in line with his broader theological commitments.
10. The importance of 'multiple groundings' in explaining reference shift is emphasised by Michael Devitt (Devitt and Sterelny, 1999, pp. 75–76).

11. Gellman's setting up of this problem has some similarities with Michael Devitt's discussion of the *qua* problem. This is the problem for the causal theory of reference of how, on an initial naming, the name picks the right bearer out of the things that the speaker is experiencing. Devitt would not agree with Gellman's solution. See Devitt and Sterelny (1999, pp. 79–81).

8 Introduction

1. See also U. T. Place (1956).
2. See Malcolm (1954) for a behaviourist development of Wittgenstein.
3. One of the most serious objections is that the reductive analysis requires us to posit further mental states. See Chisholm (1957).
4. Note that both 'minimalism' and 'deflationism' are philosophical terms of art that are used differently by different philosophers, though usually to refer to theories that are closely related to the ones we are considering here.
5. This position has been defended by, among others, Neil Tennant (1995).
6. See Wright (1992, ch. 2). For recent discussion, see Wright (2003); for critical assessment, see Tennant (1995) and Kenyon (1999).

9 Reductionism

1. The reductive class being made up of non-religious sentences, it is up to the reductionist to specify the scope of the disputed class of sentences, but I take religious reductionism to take them to include at least sentences about God.
2. See Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* (1919), for a thoroughgoing application of Euhemerus's theory to the pagan gods.
3. See Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* IX.17 (1985, p. 188), who identifies Euhemerus as an atheist.
4. This is not to say that naturalists are correct in thinking that many of the posited facts distinctive of religious belief are incompatible with or not the proper object of scientific enquiry; this is, however, widely assumed by naturalists to be the case.
5. See Bower (2001) for more discussion.

10 Minimalism

1. For extensive further discussion of this topic, see Pedersen and Wright (2013).

11 Truth in Religion

1. My selection of areas of debate is guided by the general proposals set out by Crispin Wright (1992). A third possible area of difference concerning the nature of religious disagreement is effectively secured in favour of the face value theory by what will be said about the evidence transcendence of religious truth.

2. There is a substantial and well-known literature on miracles, much of it prompted by Hume (1975a, section X).
3. A more complicated case would be a subjectivism about claims about what is funny. For example, it might be argued that their truth depends on what people typically find amusing. The question about evidence transcendence will then transfer to the reduced psychological discourse.

12 Introduction

1. For a detailed historical and philosophical treatment of Aquinas's theory of analogy that carefully traces its connections to Aristotle's theory, see Roger M. White (2010). White also considers subsequent ideas about analogy in religion in the work of Karl Barth and Immanuel Kant.
2. See also Jüngel (1974), Sarot (1992).
3. A helpful review of different types of quasi assertion is given by Kalderon (2005, pp. 119–29).
4. See Field (1980). Yablo (2002) comes closest to adopting hermeneutic fictionalism about mathematics.

13 Metaphor and Analogy

1. See Fogelin (1988) for an account that construes metaphor as a form of indirect speech but rejects the comparison of metaphor with figures of speech like irony.
2. For more background and detail, see Carston (2002), ch 5.
3. For discussion see, Alston (1989, ch. 5).
4. According to Alston, the speaker's real intentions, whether or not they are explicitly formulated, are determined by the truth conditions that the speaker would recognise for the metaphor's assertion.
5. If it did, then Alston's theory would run into the 'humpty-dumptyism' objection raised against Braithwaite.

14 Fictionalism

1. Brandom adds a second commitment: that in asserting something, a speaker licenses hearers to rely on the asserted proposition. However, as Kölbel (2011, pp. 67–9) argues, the licence to rely on someone else's assertion can be understood as following from the asserter's obligation to justify the asserted proposition.
2. The normative commitment theory of assertion has a number of supporters but remains philosophically contentious. For arguments against the theory, see Pagin (2004).

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Index

- Adams, R. M., 146
 afterlife, 32–3
 Alston, William, xiii, 10, 92–3, 98, 137, 154, 157, 176–80, 205
 analogy, 153–7, 168–9
 see also metaphor
 Anselm, *see* St Anselm
 apophatics, ix, 11, Ch. 2, 183–8
 elimination problem, 14, 17–20
 linguistic vs speech act options, 17–19, 183–4
 negative method or via negativa, 16–17, 23
 reference problem, 17, 23–5, 86–96, 98
 see also Denys the Areopagite; Evagrius Ponticus; intrinsic properties; The Cloud of Unknowing; transcendence
 Aquinas, *see* St Thomas Aquinas
 assertion, 193–200
 attitude theories, Part I
 history misrepresented, 9–11
 logic of religious language, 11, 81–3
 motivation argument, 66–70
 objections to, 71–85
 positive account of attitudes, 11, 18, 20–1, 52–3
 varieties of, 5–6
 see also belief; expressivism; internalism; moderate attitude theory; non-cognitivism
 Augustine, *see* St Augustine
 Austin, J. L., 18–19
 Ayer, A. J., 4, 11, 40–9, 108

 Bach, Kent, 95–6
 belief and desire
 belief-desire theory of action, 5, 65–7
 besires, 65–6
 directions of fit, 65–6
 faith, 32, 61–5
 input and output, 33, 78
 regulative account, 61–3
 see also internalism
 Berkeley, George, 4, 11, 26–39, 65, 107
 evocative theory, 34
 hybrid theory, 36–7
 introspection argument, 28–30, 37–8
 logic objection, 38–9
 positive account of attitudes, 36
 on religious mysteries, 28–33, 36–7
 see also expressivism; grace; internalism; original sin; The Trinity
 Black, Max, 160, 162–3
 Blackburn, Simon, 6–7, 49–50, 56–7, 75, 77, 133–5
 Boghossian, Paul, 112
 Braithwaite, R. B., 11, 40–53
 Brandom, Robert, 195–6, 205
 Byrne, Peter, 138–9

 Carnap, Rudolf, 107
 Carston, Robyn, 165–7
 Church, Alonzo, 44
Cloud of Unknowing, The, 4, 15–16
 Crombie, I. M., 154
 Cupitt, Don, 4, 159, 201

 Davidson, Donald, 160–2
 Dennett, Daniel, 108
 Denys the Areopagite, 4, 13–25, 98, 185–6
 Derrida, Jacques, 13, 18, 185–8
 Descartes, René, 22–3
 Devitt, Michael, 100–1, 203–4
 Dewey, John, 113
 divine command theory, 146–9
 Donellan, K, 97
 Dummett, Michael, xiii, 202

- Euhemerus, 116–17
 Euthyphro dilemma, 147–8
 Evagrius Ponticus, 4, 15–16
 Evans, Gareth, 99–102
 expressivism, 6–12, 17, 71–85
 analysis problems, 71–3
 atheism, 73–7
 Berkeley, George, 31–2, 35
 comedic discourse, 7–8
 defined, 6
 ethical, 11–12, 41–2, 48–51
 explanation problem, 83–5
 expressive function, 36
 Frege-Geach objection, 81–3, 202
 introspection, 77–9
 plans, 49–51
 quasi-realism, 75, 79
 sensations, 80–1
 truth and facts, 75–6
 see also internalism; R. B. Braithwaite; subjectivism
- fictionalism, 157–9, ch. 14
 hermeneutic and revolutionary, 159
 modest fictionalism, 158, 193–200
 praise theory, 183–8
 self-deception, 189–93
 see also Georges Rey; Jean-Luc Marion
- Frege, Gottlob, 89–90
- Gellman, Jerome, 102–4
 Gibbard, Allan, 49–50
 grace, 29–31, 36
 Grice, H. P., xi, 161, 163
 Guttenplan, Samuel, 161
- Horwich, Paul, 113
 Hume, David, 201
 humpty-dumptyism, 52
 Huxley, Julian, 110, 119, 121–2
- Insole, Christopher, 137–8
 internalism, 54–70
 beliefs of demons, 58–9
 Berkeley, George, 32
 de re and de dicto necessity, 68–9
 faith, 61–5
 formulations, 54–8
 linguistic evidence for, 59–60
 motivational nature, 56–7, 67–8
 rebellion, moral or religious, 56–9
 intrinsic properties, 21–2
- Johnston, Mark, 87, 93–5
- Kalderon, Mark, 158
 Kant, Immanuel, 61–2
 Kauffman, Stuart, 122
 Kaufman, Gordon, 4, 110, 120, 122–3
 Kenny, Anthony, 154, 172–5
 Kölbel, Max, 205
 Kretzmann, Norman, 27
 Kripke, Saul, 97, 203
- Lactantius, 116
 LePoidevin, Robin, 159
 Lipton, Peter, 159
 Locke, John, 26–8, 30, 171
 logical positivism, 9, 11, 14, 40–5
- MacFarlane, John, 195
 Mach, Ernst, 107
 Mackie, J. L., 10
 Marcion of Sinope, 93
 Marion, Jean-Luc, 13, 18, 185–8
 McFague, S., 154, 170–1
 Meland, Bernard, 119–20
 metaphor, 20, 153–7
 analogy and metaphor, 154–6, 168–9
 contextualist theory, 165–7, 181–2
 Davidson's theory, 160–2
 indirect speech theory, 163–4, 179–81
 interaction theory, 162–3, 180–1
 irreducibility theory defined, 157
 irreducibility thesis evaluated, 170–82
 loose talk, 165–7
 open-ended, 177, 179
 see also Antony Kenny; Donald Davidson; John Searle; Max Black; Sally McFague
- Mill, J. S., 27, 87–8, 107–8
 see also reference
- minimalism, 111–15, 126–39
 miracles, 143

- moderate attitude theory, 6–7, 17,
71–85, 183–4
apophatics, 17–21, 24–5
defined, 5
motivation argument for, 66–70
- Nielsen, Kai, 136
- non-cognitivism, 17, 62
defined, 5
rejected, 9
- O’Leary-Hawthorne, John, 78
- original sin, 31, 34–5
- Peirce, Charles, 113–14, 195
- Phillips, D. Z., 74–5, 77, 79, 84,
130–1, 202
- Plantinga, Alvin, 10, 21–3,
63–4, 199
- Putnam, Hilary, 113–14, 128–30
- Ramsey, Ian, 154
- Recanati, François, 165–7, 181
- reductionism, 79–80, 107–11,
116–25
behaviourism, 108
defined, 79, 107
ethical naturalism, 108–9
explanatory versus truth
conditional, 116–17
phenomenalism, 107–9
religious naturalism, 119–20, 122
revisionary or non-revisionary,
121–3
see also Baruch Spinoza; Bernard
Meland; Gordon Kaufman;
Henry Wieman; subjectivism
- reference, 23–5, 86–104
causal theory, 97–9
cluster theory, 90–1, 97
descriptivism, 89–92, 95
disagreement, 92–3, 101–2
‘God’ as a proper name, 86–7, 96
hidden indexical theory, 203
hybrid theories, 99–102
implicature, 94, 96
Millian theory, 87–9, 92–6
nominal description theory,
95–6
see also Kent Bach; Mark Johnston;
minimalism
- religious discourse and language
assertions, 193–200
face value theory, viii–xi, 3–4, 9,
77, 83, 107–15, 130, 140–1,
148–9, 153–4
revisionary vs non-revisionary
theories of, xii, 4–5
scope of, viii
speech acts, 19
- Rey, Georges, 158, 189–93
- Rosen, Gideon, 75
- Russell, Bertrand, 89
- Ryle, Gilbert, 108
- St Anselm, 87
- St Augustine, 13, 116
- St Thomas Aquinas, 64, 154
- Salmon, Nathan, 94
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich, 124
- Searle, J., 90–1, 160, 163–4, 179
- Smith, James, 186
- Smith, Michael, 65–6
- Snyder, Daniel, 78
- Song of Songs, The*, viii
- Soskice, Janet, 154
- speech acts, 18–20
- Spinoza, Baruch, 110, 118–19
- Stalnaker, Robert, 194–6
- subjectivism, 79–81, 123–5
defined, 79
distinct from expressivism,
79–81
sensations, 80–1
- Sullivan, Meghan, 100–2
- Swinburne, Richard, 10, 64–5, 78,
154, 168–9
- Tappolet, Christine, 133
- Tillich, Paul, 143, 157
- transcendence
epistemological vs conceptual,
13–15
reference problem, 21–5
self-defeating, 21–5
see also apophatics; intrinsic
properties
- Tresan, Jon, 70

Trinity, The, 31, 35–6

truth

correspondence, 113–14

cosmological role, 142–5

deflationary theory, 75–7,

111–15, 127

evidential and epistemic constraints,

114, 130–3, 135–6, 140–9

pluralism, 132–3

robust (face value) account,

114–15, 128, 140–9

superassertibility, 114, 138

unified or fragmentary, 114–15,

130–3

see also minimalism

Turner, Denys, 14, 18, 203

Van Inwagen, Peter, 10, 73

verification and verificationism, 11,

40–8, 135–6

White, Roger, 205

Wieman, Henry, 110, 119–20

Williamson, Timothy, 132–3

Wilson, Deirdre, 166–7

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, x, 62, 74,

79–81, 90–1, 108, 124–31,

133–5, 143–4

see also minimalism

Wright, Crispin, 57, 113–14,

131–3, 140, 142–3,

147–9, 204

Wynn, Mark, 10

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